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# CANDLES IN THE WIND

MAUD DIVER.

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# CANDLES IN THE WIND

BY

MAUD DIVER

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"THE GREAT AMULET"

"The light of every soul burns upward: but most of them are candles in the wind. Let us allow for atmospheric disturbances."—GEORGE MEREDITH

"In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be. Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within."
—GEORGE MEREDITH

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TO

MY FATHER

IN ALL LOVE AND GRATITUDE

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK.

M. D.

# PREFATORY NOTE

THIS book completes a trilogy of novels, designed with a view to giving a fuller presentment of the varied vicissitudes of life and work on the Indian Frontier than the scope of one book would admit, and my best thanks and acknowledgments are due to Colonel Durand, C. B., C. I. E., without whose kind permission and help the chapters dealing with Gilgit and Hunza could not have been written. Although incidents and events in this part of the story are mainly true to fact, I wish it to be clearly understood that none of the characters are drawn from any of the individuals concerned.

MAUD DIVER

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# BOOK I.

## THE ANGEL OF THE FLAMING SWORD.

# CANDLES IN THE WIND.

## CHAPTER I.

There dwells a wife by the Northern Gate
And a wealthy wife is she:
She breeds a race of roving men,
And casts them oversea;

And the good wife's sons come home again
With little into their hands,
But the lore of men, that ha' dealt with men
In the new and naked lands.

—KIPLING.

THE path was no more than a six-foot mule track and an unpleasant one at that; a knife-scratch across the harsh face of desolation, whose dominant features of rock and stone and sharply jutting spurs were unredeemed by the least suggestion of tenderness in outline or tint. But even a knife-scratch along a four-mile stretch of cliff, hard as the nether mill-stone, and steep as a house is no mean achievement for a handful of men, walled in by stupendous heights; their shattered summits softened and beautified by the white glimmer and indigo shadows of eternal snow. Cliffs of this formidable character, locally known as *parris*, are a distinctive feature of the Hindu Kush, as big-game hunters and trans-frontier officers know to their sorrow; the more so when these last are called upon to create a roadway fit for transport, out of a one-foot native track airily supported on pegs driven between the stones, degenerating at intervals to mere ledges of rock, or climbing steep clefts by means of small tree trunks, notched into rough steps, and polished by years of use.

Eighteen months in the Gilgit district had familiarized

Alan Laurence with tasks of this kind. But the heart of conglomerate is not to be softened by increase of patience or skill: and what this particular bit of road represented in unwearied resource and toil was known only to the Engineer subaltern responsible for its existence, and to the little company of Kashmiri Sappers who had wrestled with and wrought upon it through the rainless heat of August and September, waking the echoes with the thunder of dynamite, the clatter of pick and hammer; with shouts of triumph when the cliff responded to their valiant tickling of its surface, and choruses of despair when a whole day's work collapsed before their eyes; the fragments of it leaping and bounding madly into the valley bottom, three hundred feet down, where the Kanjut River—swollen to a torrent by melted snow and glacier *débris*—tumbled past in dark discoloured waves, tipped here and there with creamy crests of foam.

But the way of life is by persistence: and now, on this golden morning of October, as Laurence—a square, well-knit figure in khaki uniform and helmet—stood watching operations, he congratulated himself on signs incontestable that the end was at hand. The last hundred yards had gone near to breaking his heart, and had brought his Kashmiris to the verge of despair. For, at this point, the rock gave place to a stretch of steep hillside, all sand and loose stones—material as discouraging to deal with as a man of invertebrate character. Cut back and back as they might, firm ground there was none. Strong stone supporting walls had three times given way with a run; and their ruins formed a reef in the river that mocked at man's insect activities as it leaped the barrier with a shout of Homeric laughter.

But it seemed that the fourth wall was disposed to stand: that at last the cliff was conquered, the road across it an accomplished fact: and Laurence, looking back over the past two months was not ill-pleased with the result of his labours. True, the track was but a prelude to more formidable achievements of its kind; an item, insignificant enough, in the great work of organization and reform that had been going on for nearly two years in this wild mountain district of Gilgit. But at least it was a sound item. It would last. And he who

can prophecy that of the day's work is a being favoured of gods and men. Laurence approved it mentally as "not half a bad little job,"—the modern subaltern's equivalent for the Biblical "very good." The Colonel would probably endorse his verdict in much the same negative fashion: a satisfying reflection when a man has the good fortune to admire his chief. Altogether with eighteen months of solid work behind him, the chance of six months' leave ahead, and a natural heritage of health and high spirits superadded, Alan Laurence had small inclination to quarrel with this "sorry scheme of things entire," which most of us would so joyfully remodel,—probably to our own undoing: and he was still young enough to get some enjoyment even out of grappling with the stubborn foundation stones of the Hindu Kush.

In the colossal emptiness of cliff and mountain his handful of Sappers, a hundred yards off, showed like a swarm of ants crawling over the corpse of an elephant. They were testing the road now—cautiously, mindful of former disasters: and as Laurence drew near a shout of victory greeted him:—a shout that broke midway into a howl of execration. No need to ask the cause. A cloud of dust, the rattle and splash of falling stones, and khaki figures scurrying out of the danger zone gave answer, eloquently enough; while, in the midst of the *débris*, a pitiful brown object, with flying legs and arms, told the fate of a venturesome coolie, cut off from retreat, and flung shrieking into the torrent, that received stones and corpse, alike, with its hoarse eternal chuckle of derision.

Laurence stood still and set his teeth.

"Damn the thing!" he muttered, scowling. "Two days' work gone to blazes in five minutes! How the deuce is a man to conjure loose sand into solid earth?"

The same problem, it seemed, was puzzling his Kashmiris, creatures of little grit at the best of times: for now the native corporal stood before him, saluting—the dust of defeat upon his uniform and the shadow of it in his eyes.

"Behold now, the Sahib hath seen. Four times hath the river taken toll of our toil. How can the servants of the Maharaj do more? This thing entirely may not be."

But though the statement echoed his own thought, Laurence met it with instant denial: and it is upon countless small happenings of this kind that the power of England in India rests; the power that enables mere boys to handle and command men of twice their own age and experience.

"Nevertheless, this thing must be," he asserted quietly. "How should I carry such child's talk as thine to the Colonel Sahib? Lose no time in whining. Get fresh materials together, and I myself will see that stronger foundations are laid."

The man salaamed, and hesitated. "Hazúr," he began, fidgetting nervously with the buckle of his belt.

"Well, . . . Out with it, man."

"There is talk among the *coolie-lōg* that this trouble is wrought by an evil demon of these hills, who wills not that his meditations be disturbed by the noise of shot and hammer, and by the passing to and fro of men and horses through the valley."

Laurence laughed aloud.

"What then? Will the Colonel Sahib regard the wrath of demons? And is the *zubbardusti* gentleman up there a toll-gate keeper that we should offer him *dasturi** in order to pass through his hills?"

"*Nahin, nahin,* Hazúr, it is no matter for laughing, seeing that the work of our hands hath been four times set at naught. Great is the Colonel Sahib, regarding neither gods nor men. But we who be as dust upon the earth dare not scoff at the evil one, lest worse befall. Therefore, if it seemeth good to the Sahib, is it permitted that we kill a goat and make *poojah* before obeying your Honour's commands?"

And if the request drew a smile from the Englishman, there lurked in it no tincture of contempt. He was beginning, dimly and gradually, to know something of this India—vast, complex, mysterious, wise in a Wisdom that, for the West, is foolishness,—and to sympathize, where five years earlier he would have scorned: for sympathy is by knowledge out of an understanding heart.

"Why, certainly, Ghulam Bux," said he. "Kill as many goats as you please, if you think it will mend matters. Only look sharp about it and don't make your *poojah*† too

*Toll. †Prayer.

long-winded. For the road must be finished to-morrow without fail."

The depth of the man's obeisance was the measure of his gratitude.

"May the Sahib live for ever. The thing shall be done."

And Laurence, retiring to a discreet distance, drew out pipe and tobacco, and sat down on a ledge of rock, to wait:—the art, of all others, that a man learns most thoroughly in the East. Followed a scene which, but for the anachronism of Imperial Service uniforms, might have been borrowed straight from the Pentateuch. After a wearisome interval the goat arrived, a creature pitifully lean and small, hustled unceremoniously between two coolies to its appointed end. A dash of cold water over the bewildered victim produced the shiver that ensures a favourable reception at the hands of the gods. Then Ghulam Bux, unsheathing a long knife, struck off the head at a blow, and Laurence, with a true sportsman's distaste for slaughter, turned away his eyes. A shout went up: "The sacrifice is accepted! *Shahbash, bai, shahbash!*"* and jets of blood from the severed arteries sprinkled the unconcerned bystanders. One of them picking up the head, flung it defiantly into the river; but the body, leaving a crimson trail in its wake, was dragged to the edge of the ruined pathway, where the ceremony culminated in the erection of a rough cairn, crowned with a consecrated flag—the eternal symbol of victory. While this finale and the *poojah* that followed were in progress, Laurence took out a small book that lived in his breast coat pocket, and made a rapid pencil sketch of the scene. But although the result revealed a certain vigour of draughtsmanship and an artist's eye for effect, the man's hand was unpractised, and his lines neither few enough, nor decisive enough to satisfy his fastidious taste. It was the conception of an artist marred by the execution of an amateur; a fact none knew better than himself. His first attempt was torn out with a stifled oath; and the second pleased him little better. "But I'll have another shot at it later," he decided, undismayed; and scribbling beneath it, by way of title, "The real science of road-making in the East," he fell to glancing through a score of others,

* "Bravo, brothers!"

good, bad and indifferent; all of them telling the same tale of the half-developed artist in the man struggling persistently, vainly, for complete self-expression.

It is no uncommon trouble among cultivated men, this haunting sense of an imprisoned talent; this cry from the depths of a power that strives unceasingly to be born into the world of achievement, and strives in vain. Possibly, in the mysterious trend of acts and impulses towards some unknown, ultimate End, the discipline of balked desire may have its own uses in the soul's evolution: and at least it ensures a larger outlook and the sympathy that springs from having tried and failed. Not that Alan Laurence would, in any case, have wished himself other than he was,—a man of action, and a maker of things practical; but that his manifold nature demanded a more varied outlet for the exuberant thoughts and activities of youth than a cut and dried public school education had vouchsafed to him; the more so, now that the vicissitudes of Indian service had set him in a mountain world of such surpassing grandeur and desolation that the very Himalayas seemed dwarfed to mere hills by comparison.

For in this man, the son of ill-assorted parents, the clash of opposing forces and tendencies amounted almost to a dual personality. From his mother came the sunlit hair and eyes, and the sunlit temperament that belongs to both. To her also he owed his passion for the beautiful in art and nature, his vivid realization of pain and joy,—manifested, in younger days, by a tendency to snatch happiness at any price; and in all things a certain headlong impetuosity that needed a strong controlling force to keep its possessor from running on the rocks. From his father, on the other hand, came the mathematician's brow, the cleft chin and square, knotted hand, the practical love of forcing obstinate material to take what shape he chose, that had decided his choice of a career, and that, for all his love of ease and pleasure, kept him devoted to his work. More than a grain of truth lurked in his whimsical assertion that the spirits of his parents dominated him by turns, seeming as little able to harmonize in the nature of this their son, as they had been in their difficult years of marriage. Certain it is, that

for the full ripening of his character and powers the elements that warred in him needed fusing into a more uniformly balanced whole; and from such fusion, a fine result might confidently be expected. So cunningly does Nature ensnare us in the flame-wrought net of passion for her own ends; caring nothing for the happiness of the individual and everything for the perpetuation of the race.

And in the meantime, this man of many contradictions —who, for all his eight and twenty years, was still little more than a boy at heart—gave small heed to the unsolved marvel of personality, and enjoyed life exceedingly; putting into work and play the abundant vitality that goes with chestnut hair and eyes blue as the sea in summer. But "play" had been a negligible quantity since he set his face towards Gilgit: a word that, in these early days of occupation, held no significance for the bulk of Anglo-Indians. A few, whose geography was less sketchy than that of the average Briton, knew it as a black dot on the map, due north of Kashmir; a land, teeming with game, and therefore a land of Heart's Desire. But only the Indian Government, harassed by Russia's growing restlessness in Central Asia, and the half dozen British officers,—who for nearly two years had exercised, undismayed, their racial talent for "making riflemen from mud"—knew it for the key of the Great Northern Gateway into India; a key worth holding even at some cost in toil, money and valuable—though less valued—human lives. And Gilgit has taken toll abundantly of all three.

In pioneer work of this kind, a good Sapper is worth his weight in gold: a fact fully realized by Colonel Lenox, R. A., now established as first British Agent at Gilgit, with the addition of Brevet rank to add to his local prestige. From the start he had paid Laurence the compliment of working him only a few degrees less unsparingly than he worked himself, with the difference that the younger man got ten days' leave for shooting in the well-stocked nullahs of the District whenever the coil of things permitted. And Laurence had responded creditably to the spur. Irrigation, road-making, the hutting of troops and repairing of forts and bridges,—such had been the varied programme of the stiffest year's

work he had yet known; and he had put heart and brain and body into it all with a right good will. But the heat and loneliness of the past two months on the Nomál road had hastened the inevitable recoil, the natural craving of youth for the less strenuous side of life, the life that means not only thinking and doing, but feeling and enjoying, while the zest for both is at its zenith. The stark heights and narrow valleys, the reverberate thunder of snow-swollen torrents oppressed him suddenly like a night-mare, till the urgent need grew up in him to get right away from it all;—from the grind, the monotony, the eternally pervasive element of native treachery and intrigue, that is a main feature of political service, not less than from the overpowering beauty and terror of the mountains themselves. Eye and brain craved the rest-fulness of wide horizons, the vast vague levels of the Plains. But beyond everything he wanted to take things easily for a time; to feel himself his own master; to lie in bed of a morning if he felt inclined; and—this, perhaps, more than all—to talk and dance with a woman once again. For, like many men of his age and temper-ament he found continuous banishment from feminine influence and feminine charm a very real drawback to trans-frontier existence. Finally, the dread of a second winter in Gilgit,—cut off, by snowed-up passes, from communication with the outer world,—emboldened him to ask for six months' leave on completion of his task, backing his request with the reminder that the bulk of material needed for further work had been lying for weeks on the wrong side of the Kashmir passes two hundred and forty miles off, and—Kashmir officials being past masters in the gentle art of procrastination—would probably continue to lie there till the following spring.

Colonel Lenox, who was at Simla on business at the time, had forwarded and recommended the application with a smile of amused understanding. "Pushed him a shade too hard lately, poor chap!" he reflected, while sealing the long envelope whose despatch was as the chance pressure of a spring that sets a complex machine in motion. "Scores of things waiting to be done. But he'll be twice as keen after six months of loafing. Hope he gets it."

And Laurence hoped so too, with increasing impatience, as the days slipped into weeks and still the official sanction came not. The thought that it might even now be at Gilgit added poignancy to the vexation of further delay. But if only this God-forsaken road (he coupled it mentally with a more vigorous adjective) could be induced to stand fast, he might reach the Agency in less than two days' time.

Meanwhile his men collected fresh materia with true Oriental deliberation; and Laurence had just finished his scratch lunch when Golâb Singh again presented himself—his face radiant, his uniform flecked with the blood of sacrifice.

"Hazúr, all is in readiness. The Evil one will make no further *baberi*.* Will it please the Sahib to direct the laying of new foundations?"

Undoubtedly it pleased the Sahib. Demon or no demon, the wall should hold together this time. He swore it, under his breath; and as if summoned by his will, a new idea came to him.

"By Jove, I have it! Why the deuce didn't I think of it sooner?" he cried, springing to his feet. Then, turning to the astonished Kashmiri:—"Look here, Ghulam Bux, make the men collect a lot of brushwood, and put good thick layers of it between the stones. That'll do the trick, as sure as my name's Laurence."

The man saluted, and returned to his fellows, a smile of superior wisdom lurking in the depths of his beard. Why should the Sahib make fresh trouble concerning brushwood, when the matter now lay entirely in the hands of the gods? But there is one thing certain about the orders of the Sahib-lõg, however perplexing or devoid of sense;—they must needs be obeyed. So brushwood was brought, and the foundations renewed yet again: the men working zealously in the faith of little children, certain of the outcome by reason of the flag and the consecrated pile of stones. Nor were they disappointed; for, as Laurence had foreseen, the brushwood "did the trick"; and a mule road to Nomál was added to the tale of that year's achievements.

Twenty-four hours later he rode unscathed across the

* Trouble.

path on his sturdy Kabuli, an elated fox-terrier skipping at his heels; rock and cliff re-echoing to the cheers of his men.

Laurence smiled as he listened. "Honour to whom honour is due!" he said to himself. "And of course it all goes to the goat and their blessed little cairn with the flag atop. I and my private mania for brushwood supports count for nothing. . . . But, Lord, what matter . . . so long as we're through!"

Sappers and coolies and the varied impedimenta of his little force crossed over also, in safety: and they camped that night at Pilché, a sandy waste, six miles from Gilgit, where is neither sight nor sound of living thing, but a few dwarf tamarisks, and the restless roar of the river, that serves only to make desolation doubly desolate. For all that, Laurence slept soundly; and at dawn—long before the sun had looked over the eastward peaks, stamped in ink upon a primrose sky,—he was once more in the saddle, whistling "Over the hills and far away," as he cantered briskly towards Gilgit and friendly white faces, and the official envelope which, with any luck, should mean six months of freedom from the work he honestly loved.

## CHAPTER II.

> Oh, it's die we must; but it's live we can!
> And the glory of earth and sun
> Is all for the joy of woman and man,
> And the longing that makes them one.
> —HENLEY.

Of all the valleys that radiate from Gilgit into the mountain fastnesses of the Hindu Kush, few can surpass in sheer majesty of nakedness and gloom the terrible series of defiles through which the Kanjút River works its way down from the heights beyond the twin States of Hunza and Nagar,—hornets' nests both, of savagery and intrigue. A strong natural position,—backed by visits from Chinese officials and Russian officers,—had bred in their rulers an exaggerated belief in their own supremacy which, despite tribute paid to Kashmir, they frankly paralleled with that of their fellow chiefs, the Emperor of China and the Czar of Russia! These local Cæsars had, from the outset, proved a thorn in the flesh of the unwelcome British intruder, who was called upon to unravel the tangled politics of a confederacy of semi-independent Native states; to make the crooked straight and to keep them all more or less happy and out of mischief: a task rendered no lighter by the fact that for most of them mischief and happiness were synonyms for murder, robbery, slave-dealing and other mild amusements of the kind.

Among them all were none more unscrupulous and refractory than the Heaven-descended monarchs of Hunza and Nagar, whose robber hordes had, for years been the terror of the neighbouring tribes, and of the caravans traversing the great trade route between India and Asia. And if Eldred Lenox—in bending all his notable energy and power of organization to the cleansing of an Augean stable rank with cruelty and corruption—looked for any antagonism, beyond the persistent, covert opposition that is the daily bread of the pioneer Political, he knew whence it would come; knew also that the one

effectual means of removing the hornets' sting lay in driving a good mule road through the worst part of the Kanjút valley, so that—if need were—troops could be pushed rapidly into Hunza itself. But since the mere making of the road might mean war, Lenox' progress had been hampered as usual by the need for striking that just mean between caution and boldness which spells military and political success.

All this Laurence knew and thought upon as he joyfully cast the miles behind him on that mellow October morning; his pulses beating in time to the music of the Kabuli's hoofs; his heart affirming the Credo of youth:

> "Oh Life, you may shatter and rend and break me;
> All pain is pleasure that springs from you!"

At length, as the defile opened out and the gold in the East spread upward, permeating the blue, Laurence caught sight of another horseman trotting leisurely towards him. There was no mistaking the action of the graceful Bilooch mare, or the long legs and square shoulders of her rider, and to Laurence the sight was welcome as water in a desert place. Two years of companionship in the wilds will bring men into a closer, truer relation than a decade of civilized life.

"Stunning good sort, the Colonel, coming out to look me up," he thought; and before they were within speaking distance, he accosted Lenox with a prolonged shout which the hills caught up and flung to and fro till the valley was alive with ghostly greetings. By way of acknowledgment, Lenox held up a blue envelope: and the Kabuli bounded forward in response to heels pressed forcibly against his sides.

"All square, sir?" Laurence asked breathlessly as they met.

"All square! You and Finlay can go down together as soon as he comes in from the nullahs; and he's due any day now."

"Good business!" And flushing like a schoolboy, he slipped his treasure into the breast pocket of his khaki coat.

Lenox looked on smiling; and the gleam in his grave eyes conjured away at least five years from the deeply lined face, with its premature frosting of silver at the temples and the corners of the black moustache.

"Excellent business—for you!" he agreed, turning the mare's head and riding on at a foot's pace beside the Sapper. "It will be my turn to say the same when I hear you are on your way back again!"

Laurence looked up quickly:

"Hope you don't think I'm shirking, Colonel? I own I have felt a bit off work just lately.—But I would never have applied if there had been the ghost of a chance that those duffers in Kashmir would push our fresh material through the passes before they're closed. You know that?"

"Yes, my dear chap, I know it! 'I can see a church by daylight!' No discredit to you either, if you do feel stale. I've been grinding your bones to make my bread this last ten months; and you've stood it like a Briton."

"A fellow can stand a deal of grinding under the right sort of chief," Laurence answered in the tone of shame-faced constraint with which an Englishman instinctively counterbalances a gracious speech. "You'll find me game for plenty more next spring. I'll be up in Kashmir and across the passes the first moment it's feasible, bringing along as much material as coolies can carry. And we'll make headway with the Chaichar *parri* before the river calls a halt."

Lenox nodded: "Good man! We must have the road clear to Chalt before next winter. Then, if the Hunza scoundrel plays the fool, I shall at least be able to hit back —hard. Always supposing Government doesn't refuse me the necessary troops."

"No chance of a big row this year, I suppose?"

"Not so far as human eye can see, which is no great distance in this complicated country. The Indus valley tribes have started their winter raids earlier than usual. Otherwise it's much the same old programme. Rumours of Russians on the Pamirs,—I've despatched Barton with six of my Pathans to find out what's up. The Nagar man is at his favourite amusement again—murdering his near relations! It's a nephew this time, poor devil, whose wife and acres took the scoundrel's fancy. The younger brother came over here for safety, and started a yarn that Hunza is bribing my best friend among the Rajahs to play into the hands of that villain Nathú Shah. Their amiable object being to murder me, and set the local tribes in a blaze. Cheerful people to deal with!"

Laurence frowned and screwed his lips into a low whistle.

"Isn't that rather too strong to be ignored, Colonel?"

"Well—it might be,—if there were a grain of truth in it. But the thing's a lie, on the face of it. 'Not a private hansom lie but a horse and a brougham lie,'" he quoted, smiling. "Just a typical case of the way their crass stupidity trips up their devilry right and left. Not but what Hunza would pay a good deal to have me 'removed,' or to set me at loggerheads with the one loyal man in the district. He won't succeed though, either way. So you can set your mind at rest. At the same time—" he paused, scanning the distance ahead—"I'd sooner you kept the matter to yourself; because—well—there are changes at the bungalow since you left. I brought my wife across when I came through from Simla."

"Your wife? Of course I won't breathe a word. She'll be here all the winter then?"

"Yes. Till I can take her back next summer, I hope."

"I'm glad of that. It must make all the difference to you."

"Yes, it does."

And Laurence, noting the unconscious softening of face and tone, realized how little he knew of this man he had grown to admire, beyond the qualities revealed in their common life and work.

"It'll make a big difference all round," he said. "Wonderful how quickly a woman civilizes a place. Children too?"

Lenox smiled and shook his head.

"No. That would hardly do—yet. Some good friends of ours, the Desmonds, were up in Kashmir this summer, and they very kindly carried off my small family to Konat. It's something of a risk having even my wife here. But she was keen to come; and she's not the sort that hampers a man."

The subject called up thoughts and visions sacred to himself; and, having already been rather more expansive than usual, Lenox relapsed into meditation.

It had surprised him from the first to find how readily the ice of his natural reserve melted in the sun-warm atmosphere of the younger man's companionship, a fact that had gone far to quicken and cement an intimacy

equally welcome to both. For Laurence saw in his Chief a soldier-Political of the type that more effectually upholds British prestige in India than all her benevolent schemes for legislation, enlightenment, and justice rolled into one:—a rugged, lonely personality walking uprightly and with unshaken nerve among the quicksands of intrigue and corruption; yet withal a complex, hypersensitive human being under his shell; a man whose confidence and friendship he felt justly proud of having won.

Urging their horses to a canter, they rode on for a while in a companionable silence, till Lenox spoke again.

"By the way, where d'you go? Home?"

"Can't afford it. Too badly crippled by debt."

"I thought as much, you young sinner. That's the curse of your jockeying and cardplaying. But a short spell of this place ought to square you, and there are worse spots than the old Punjáb for winter leave."

"Rather! I can 'chum' with Finlay at Peshawur, and get some shooting or pig-sticking down-country later on. Oh, I mean to have a thundering good time of it. I promise you!—Thank the Lord,—here we are!"

As he spoke, they emerged from the jaws of the great Kanjút defile into the more friendly open spaces of the Gilgit valley,—a land of long shadows and infinite peace, still lying half asleep under the first kiss of morning. Here the hill torrent empties itself into the Gilgit River; and the riders, turning westward followed the course of the broader stream, that quivered from grey to gold in the slanting light. For the valley running East and West is a veritable sun-trap; a multi-coloured jewel of fertility hidden in the heart of such a galaxy of lofty peaks as can hardly be matched in all the watersheds of the world. For where else shall be found within a sixty-mile radius a score of glittering Titans—the meanest of them twenty thousand feet up—towering majestic out of a grand rough and tumble of heights that, in any lesser region would themselves be reckoned abodes of the gods?

In this central valley, the mountains receding from the river, rise again abruptly from a wide alluvial plain, dotted with clumps of wormwood, and watered by a network of silver streams, the life-blood of all cultivation in the Hindu Kush. Lenox himself had wrought wonders

in Gilgit by setting Laurence and his men to elaborate this system of miniature canals; and had already reduced the expense to the State and the privation for its long-suffering troops involved in transmitting masses of grain across two hundred and forty miles of track, running over two high passes, and through valleys barren as the grave, when a tenth of the cost would have produced sufficient almost on the spot. So distracting was the incurable mismanagement and delay at the other end, that increase of local cultivation had become the ruling hobby to which Lenox devoted most of his spare time, and that of every-one else who could be pressed into his service. But by now his goodly fields of wheat and barley, millet and maize had been reaped and garnered, while the green of massed orchards and the vines that ran riot among them were splashed with crimson, burnt sienna and red-gold fire,—the sunset colours of the year.

Arrived at a perilous-looking rope-bridge, slung across the torrent from one high support to another, the riders dismounted and crossed over on foot; an awkward achievement for tall men, since the hand-rails were low, the rush of water beneath unpleasantly swift, and the whole primitive structure sagged and swayed towards the centre in a fashion sufficiently unsteadying to a lands-man's nerve. But a varied acquaintance with the vil-lainies of rope bridges had steeled eye and nerve to this critical performance; and behind them the two dogs, Vixen and Brutus, picked their way along with as much *sang froid* as though they were merely keeping their paws clear of puddles; while the horses, condemned to swim, awaited them, dripping and resigned, on the farther side.

"Better push on now," Lenox said as they mounted; and riding rapidly through the dying glory of apricot, pear and vine, they passed the Dogra fort—four-square, bastioned and loopholed,—set on a plateau amid clustered fruit trees and few score of mud huts:—the best imitation of a town to be found between Srinagar and the cities of Central Asia.

On and up, past more fields, through a grove of stately mulberries, and beyond these, the Agency at last: the one solitary English bungalow in all the vast area of the Hindu Kush! A friendly-looking house, with its deep,

gabled verandah, its home-like garden and orchard, its Union Jack, springing from the pedestal of ancient Buddhist statue, backed by a square-shouldered mass of snow and glacier; and over-arching all the wide blue tenderness of the sky.

But for both men the keynote of the picture was a woman's figure at the head of the verandah steps; a tall, slender strip of colour that matched the sky for tenderness; the fair hair glorified to gold; one hand shielding her eyes. To both also came the thought that this place, which had so far been just a convenient shelter in which to eat and sleep, was now, by the addition of that waiting figure, transformed into a home: a house not made with hands, at once the casket and the symbol of the highest human verities.

At sight of the riders, Quita Lenox uncovered her eyes and waved a welcome, revealing to Alan's interested gaze a face vivid with intellect and charm, doubly irradiated by the light without and the light within: and as Lenox urged his mare forward, the younger man instinctively slackened speed. Thus he was out of earshot when Quita ran lightly down the steps, and Lenox, catching her outflung hands, held them in a close grip.

Unguessed by them, their golden moment of absorption in each other was caught by the Spinner of Destinies and woven into the pattern of Alan Laurence's life; slipped into its appointed place among the countless trivialities that go to the making of that most subtle product of spiritual chemistry—a human character. Striking sharply upon weeks of work and loneliness in harsh surroundings, this transient vision, with its intimation of things unplumbed by his philosophy, wrought a vivid impression upon Laurence of the susceptible brain and heart; crystallizing vague day-dreams that visit men's minds more often than they are apt to confess; suggesting the supreme significance of human passion sanctified by the permanent fusion of two lives in one.

It was as if an angel's wing had stirred the pool of his inner consciousness, whose stillness had so far reflected little beyond his own image, his own young desires of flesh and spirit. But now, with the troubling of the water, came the exquisitely disturbing thought that

somewhere in the world—in India, it might be, or even in Peshawur, lived and breathed the one woman who would wait for and welcome him as the woman in the blue dress was welcoming Lenox at the foot of the verandah steps; and for the first time he seriously regretted the mountain of debt he had light-heartedly built up in the early years of his service; a mountain not to be removed by faith, but only by a steady self-discipline very foreign to his nature.

But in the meantime the present claimed him; for by now he was on foot, shaking hands with the woman in blue, and apologizing instinctively for so early an intrusion. "But I was so keen to find out about my leave," he explained, half laughing, "that I started before dawn."

"Why apologize?" she asked, with a smile of intimate understanding. "Impatience is my favourite vice! Besides, you forget . . . it's *I* who am the intruder, and must adapt myself to the ways of the wilds. Very civilized ways I find them on the whole! This morning, though, I've had the treat of entertaining a genuine barbarian, who dropped from the clouds an hour ago, in shooting kit of the roughest, with a month or two of beard upon him that he did not love! Especially when he found a superfluous woman drinking tea in the verandah and was far too polite and thirsty to refuse a cup himself."

"Finlay . . . by Jove!" both men exclaimed in a breath.

"Yes, that was the name . . . Finlay, of the 51st P. I., up for three months' shooting. Said he had got a markhor that would make *you* green with envy," she added, smiling at her husband. "He gave me a graphic account of how he stalked it for three days, and altogether behaved beautifully, poor man; though I know he hated me heartily for being there at all. He's in your room now, Eldred, probably cutting his throat with your razor in his zeal to be rid of that beard! I told him to ask Zyarulla for anything and everything, even a shirt, as he seemed in need of one!"

"Good woman!" Lenox applauded her; then, turning to Laurence, he added: "Now I suppose you'll take the bit between your teeth and bolt?"

"Rather so!" the other answered fervently. "He can have a day's law while I get my things together, and we'll be off on Thursday. I'll go and fix it up with him straight."

Laurence got his own way, as he was apt to do; not by aggression but by a rare quality of loveableness that made others loath to disappoint him: and two mornings later he rode out of Gilgit with "Finlay of the 51st P. I.," no longer a barbarian with a two months' beard, but scrupulously shirted and shaven; a loosely built man of middle height, and of a rather distinctive ugliness. Notable because, with all its faults as a picture, the face was worth reading as a page for those skilled in discerning the hidden writing of character, that only becomes plainly visible in the heat of fire.

Laurence himself had deciphered little of it. Yet he fully believed that he knew the man who had been drawn to his own impetuous, happy-hearted nature as irresistibly as a filing of steel to a magnet. Mere attraction had been ripened into friendship by Finlay's tact and skill in extricating Laurence from the tentacles of a married woman of the type that amuses herself by "educating boys" in the prehistoric art of playing with fire; and his frank gratitude for a rather unusual act of knight-errantry had deepened into that strong, inarticulate bond between man and man which is one of the most satisfying attainments in a not pre-eminently satisfying world:—a bond flexible enough to bridge disparity of age and temperament and point of view.

For Finlay, as a University candidate, had entered the Army late. Though a Captain of only six years standing, he was over forty, and looked older by reason of a certain weather-beaten aspect and a forward stoop of the shoulders due to a severe attack of rheumatic fever. Possibly he had never possessed in full measure the spring and elasticity that keep a man young. The grey-green eyes, beneath their level lids, suggested this: eyes whose look of abstraction was not to be presumed upon, as the men and officers of his Regiment had discovered early in the day. Their brooding gaze missed little that was worth seeing; for the soul that looked out through them was

the soul of a man eternally interested in the human comedy, and—beneath his veneer of good-humoured cynicism—eternally sympathetic. The large, flat-lipped mouth with its flexible corners, where a smile seemed always imminent, contrasting so noticeably with the grave, unfathomable eyes, would have made the fortune of a low comedian. Nor was the talent lacking. It had won him passing distinction in days of young frivolity at Simla; and, by an odd conjunction, had been mainly responsible for a tragedy which had darkened many years of his life.

But all shadow of tragedy was far from him now, as he rode behind Laurence, zig-zagging and scrambling among rocks and stones, up the flank of a vast alluvial fan that sprang boldly from the hill-side like a giant's arm thrust into the valley. Here was no hint of the fertility that beautifies the Gilgit oasis and its outlying villages. Terraces of ruined and deserted cornfields struck a poignant note of desolation; and on either hand naked precipices merged into the great main ranges in harsh monotony of outline and colour. It was as if they had got down to the very bones of the world. One only hint of human presence italicized the emptiness of the scene. High up on the sheer hillside—a landmark visible for miles—a solitary Buddhist tower kept watch and ward, like a sentry frozen at his post. No ruin; though it had so stood through centuries of bone-dry winters and summers;—a monument of man's incurable faith in the Unseen; ageless and deathless as Gautama's self.

Laurence glanced up at it, as always; his interest vaguely tinged with awe. But his artist's eye—worshipping beyond all things the external beauty of the world—passed on instinctively to a more primeval temple of Divinity, the stainless splendour of Nanga Parbat, that blocked up one end of the valley, with just one low hill in between to heighten the effect. Fourteen thousand feet of snow and glacier without a break. Each least fold and fissure clearly seen through the rarefied air. No laciest film of haze or cloudlet marring the bold purity of outline, where the twin peaks met the deep lapis-lazuli tones of the sky. A sight to set the heart of youth and health "singing like the morning stars, for joy that they

are made"; and Laurence, drawing rein as they crowned the ridge, flung up his cap and cheered till the rocks rang again and the coolies climbing the next ravine concluded that a devil must have entered into the Sahib. Then, turning in the saddle, he rested one hand on the Kabuli's flank and laughed as he met Finlay's quizzical grimace.

"Don't be alarmed, old man! The Colonel's an ogre for work, and you must make allowances! But though I'm mad to get away, no doubt I shall be just as mad to get back. For, with all its drawbacks, it's a damned fine country. Look at *that!*"—his hunting crop indicated the Mountain of the Gods—"Speaks straight to the soul of a man, if he's got one, lifts it out of the dust, and . . ." he broke off, flushing awkwardly. "I'm talking rank nonsense! But you probably know what I mean?"

"I believe I do!" Finlay answered with his inscrutable smile. "There's a poet buried alive in you somewhere, Larry. D'you think he'll ever see daylight?"

Laurence laughed again. "Great Scott, what a notion! But I've been reading some rather fine stuff while I was alone in camp, and half a dozen lines of it have been humming in my head like bees all the morning."

"Let's hear them."

"Lord, no! I couldn't spout poetry, even to you, old chap. You shall see it all when I can get at my books again." But as he rode on into the heart of a fresh ravine, he chanted under his breath the "Song of the Sword," whose "brave irresistible message," so stirringly echoed the song of his own heart.

> "Life is worth living,
> Thro' every grain of it,
> From the foundations
> To the last edge
> Of the Corner-stone—Death!"

And that night, in his narrow camp bed, he fell asleep to the tune of running water—sole voice of those eternal silences—and dreamt extravagant dreams of a veiled woman in a blue dress, who slipped out of reach every time his hands closed upon her; till—just as he had caught a corner of her veil, and flung it backward, he woke with cold beads of sweat upon his forehead, and a vague prophetic trepidation at his heart.

## CHAPTER III.

I thrilled to feel her influence near;
I struck my flag at sight:
Her starry silence smote my ear
Like sudden drums at night.
—R. L. S.

"GOOD-NIGHT, old chap. Come and take your revenge on Friday, if you're not full up this week."

"Right you are. Wait till I get my hand in again! See you at polo to-morrow. *Chordo, sais.** Hie on, old lady."

Thus apostrophized, the mare—a smart little country bred—"hied on" accordingly between long lines of trees already shedding their leaves, while darkness swept up out of the East, and in a sky of grey violet deepening swiftly to indigo the first stars quivered into life. Low down near the tree-tops the white fire of Jupiter shone, steadfast and serene. On earth two restless carriage lamps barred the darkening road with twin streams of light, and the tip of Laurence's cigar glowed like a great fire-fly with his every indrawn breath, as he leaned back in Finlay's dog-cart, letting the reins lie loose upon his knees, lazily and blessedly at peace with himself and all creation.

Already the first nip of the Punjab cold weather was in the air; and the familiar evening smell of watered dust and wood smoke was as incense in his nostrils. For your true Punjabi finds a charm, inexplicable, yet abiding, in the wide featureless Northern plains with their battalions of dusty trees and ugly white bungalows; a charm not to be eclipsed by the colour and luxuriance of the more favoured south. British perversity may lead him to disparage the thing he loves: but six thousand miles of sea may be relied upon to wash out its most scarlet sins.

Steamers and short leave, and the increasing burden

*"Let go, sais."

of officialism have loosened the ties that bound the Anglo-Indian of fifty years ago to the country and the work; but in a lesser degree men still feel the magnetism of the Punjab, and Alan Laurence already knew something of its spell.

Three days earlier he and Finlay had stepped out of the night mail from Pindi an hour before dawn, looking as spruce and fresh as only Englishmen can after an all-night journey, and had driven through the chill smoky haze of morning to the shabby bungalow which the older man shared with O'Gorman of the Police,—a freckled, ginger-headed Irishman dowered with the gift of tongues; a living compendium of Border tactics and Border yarns, whose lurid character lost nothing in the telling. "Mad as a March hare, but the best company in the station," was Finlay's verdict on his chum, and the chance phrase reaching O'Gorman's ears had proved the seed from which the joint establishment had sprung up.

Laurence found the bachelor bungalow—where the three men slept and foregathered at odd times, between work, and social distractions and meals at mess—a place of great untidiness and greater peace: a place where the wholesome odours of leather and tobacco fought for mastery; a stronghold of that most subtle and indispensable of earthly tyrants—the "bearer." For the Englishman in India rarely haggles over the price of tranquillity; and those who have the dispensing of it flourish accordingly. The two younger men, more especially, belonged to the type whose keys repose in the folds of a Hindu or Mahommedan waist belt; whose main concern in regard to money is that it should be forthcoming in moments of urgency; and your self-respecting bearer will steal, beg, or borrow rather than fail the confiding Sahib whose honour is one with his own; and who, in the interests of justice, will be duly charged extra for kerosene, charcoal, and the pony's grain, to cover all costs of the latter transaction. Laurence had applauded his friend's choice of a "stable companion," and had slipped contentedly back into the pleasant familiar paths of cold-weather station life. After the loneliness and austerity of the hills, the friendly spirit of India seemed to hold out welcoming hands to him; and eighteen months of strenuous work

and sport had set a keener edge on his naturally keen capacity for enjoyment.

His cigar ended, he flung the stump into the darkness and fell to whistling. An irresponsible school-boy sense of being "home for the holidays" uplifted him; and since England was out of the question, a winter in Peshawur offered interests and attractions sufficiently inviting. For, although a certain monotony of aspect and design stamps the English cantonment in India, this most northern of stations—the tip of the Imperial sword-blade thrust into the hills—has an atmosphere, an individuality all its own; guarding, as it does the one breach in the shale and sandstone barrier, through which invaders have poured down upon India from the beginning of days. Its avenues, and scatted bungalows, set in homelike gardens full of roses, chrysanthemums, and a score of English flowers, contrast strangely with the treeless, muttering city and the eternal menace of the Frontier hills. Both in city and cantonments the fighting element prevails. In exchange for the patient toiling Punjab, we have "a fortress with ramparts manned," alert, keen-eyed, brimming with vitality: a place for men who prefer action and responsibility to a world of talk and speculation which stultifies both.

The very air of Peshawur vibrates with lawlessness and unrest. Raids, murders, robberies are too much a part of the programme even to form a topic of conversation: and through it all the concentrated handful of Englishmen and women dance, drive and disport themselves; unconcerned, and, for the most part wholly indifferent to the vast and varied panorama in the midst of which they are constrained to spend the best years of their lives.

It is one of the first facts that strike an outsider, or a new-comer,—this frank detachment of the average Anglo-Indian from the country and its peoples. That there are exceptions goes without saying; and it is always the exceptions that count. In India's case, they are the foundation stones of Empire: and Eldred Lenox, with his quick eye for fundamentals in character, had speedily detected in Laurence a man who might, in time, be added to their number. Conditions of life and work at Gilgit, coupled with increasing respect for his Chief, had enlarged

his understanding, and consequently his sympathies: but he was still young enough to be wholesomely egotistical; and he had yet to be tested in the furnace of circumstance, passion, and failure—the crowning tests of a man.

At the present moment, his mother's spirit being in the ascendant,—he asked nothing better than permission to thrust aside work, debt, the unholy tangle of Frontier politics, and enjoy himself to the top of his bent. The three days since his arrival had been filled with those pleasant nothings of social intercourse from which the one significant Something that lies in wait for every man, may, at any moment, emerge with power and change the whole course of a life. For the great things and the good grow by the wayside among weeds; and scorners of common pleasures and common folk are the last to find them. Of such was not Alan Laurence. Wherever men and women foregathered, his friend-making spirit sought and found opportunity of enjoyment. He had cheerfully paid his "duty calls" on the General, and on Finlay's closest friend, the Commissioner's wife; had met half the station—betting, flirting, and airing cold-weather "frocks" from home—at the first gymkhana of the season; had renewed his acquaintance with racquets, and to-night, at a dance given by the Gunners, he would secure the pick of Peshawur for his partners, and finish in the small hours with second supper, choruses, and a glass of Pilsener to ward off regrets next morning! It was all very young, very harmless, and in the circumstances very excusable.

The pleasant anticipation roused him; and he gathered up the reins, as a gentle hint to Belinda that she was not altogether mistress of the situation. They were nearing the Club compound now. Its whitewashed gateposts and culverts gleamed ghostly in the dusk that was already deepening to darkness. But before they reached the gate, twin lights emerged; swayed and plunged forward. Laurence made an abortive attempt to swerve sideways; but a violent shock, and a crash of splintered glass, told him that the wheel of the trap to which the lights belonged was locked fast in his own.

The offender's horse, annoyed at the unexpected check, strained and plunged in a fashion admirably adapted to

overturn both carts; while Belinda, whose manners were proof against the most trying circumstances, set her feet like a rock and pitied the stranger his lack of education.

"Confound it, man, the road's wide enough for two, and my lamps were lighted!" Laurence called out wrathfully. "Hold your pony in, can't you, or there'll be a devil of a smash."

"I'm so sorry—so very sorry. It was horribly careless of me; but—steady, Trumpeter, steady, old boy—I hope I haven't damaged you seriously—?"

Laurence bit his lip, and cursed himself for a hot-headed fool. The voice of the supposed subaltern was a full, tender contralto, soft, yet clear; and true in tone as the low notes of a bird. The charm of it smote the man's musical ear, even while he made haste to reassure its possessor.

"You've only put out one of my eyes!" he said with a laugh. "And it's I who should apologize—for my language! I spoke without stopping to think, or—"

"Or you would have known that no one but a woman could be guilty of such erratic driving!" And she, too, laughed with evident enjoyment in completing his ungallant thought. "Would you mind telling my man—he seems nervous—to hold Trumpeter's head till we can unlock the carts. My Hindustani isn't very lucid yet. I had better get out, I suppose?"

"Yes. Wait a bit though, I'll help you down."

And, flinging a peremptory order at the sais, he hurried round to the far side of her cart with an eagerness quite out of keeping with his wrath of three minutes ago. For an instant she leaned above him, a half seen presence, small and slender, with proffered hands. In the act of taking them he hesitated.

"Better let me lift you clear of the cart. If the pony plunged that man of yours would crumple up like a cornstalk. May I?"

Her answer was a simple "Thank you"; and for less than a minute he held her between his hands. In that moment of brief unthinking contact the hour of his Destiny struck. But at the time he only knew that he was sorry when it was over.

She hurried to the pony's head; and very gingerly the

two *saises* backed their respective charges, the tender voice crooning encouragement to "Trumpeter" the while. By the light of the carriage lamp, Laurence could discern, under a wide-brimmed hat, a profile not unmeet to be matched with so rare a voice, and he made good his opportunity of studying it at intervals, during a superfluous inspection of the offending trap; smiling at the thought that if its owner had been the supposed subaltern, raw to the country, he would have bestowed small concern on any damage it might have sustained.

Then he started: for, as though aware of his thought, she had left the pony and was standing close beside him; the charm of her nearness enhanced by the mystery of darkness, and the eternal fascination of the unknown.

"Please don't trouble about my cart," she urged. "I'm only so afraid I may have damaged yours."

"Not a bit of it," he declared, trying without success to get a sight of her eyes under the tantalizing hat-brim. "It's not my own either. Belongs to a friend of mine. A stunning good chap! *He'd* never have sworn at you as I did! Is your beast really quieter now? Fit to drive?"

"Of course he is. It's I who am not fit! I'm new to India and to driving, if that's any excuse for my behaviour! But don't let me keep you any longer; and please make my apologies to your friend." And even as he put out an eager hand to help her, she sprang lightly into the cart.

"Good-night," she called softly down to him as "Trumpeter" bounded forward; and the simple word had never fallen so musically on his ears. A moment later he stood alone in the road, vaguely troubled by the dawning sense of a new significance in life, his eyes following the twin red lights till they dwindled and vanished into the illimitable dark.

Then he awoke to the engrossing trivialities of half an hour ago, and remembered the dance. It was a Fate-sent opportunity. She was bound to be there; and he would know that voice again among a thousand! With which satisfying reflection, he betook himself to the Club card-room in search of his friend.

Finlay had a partial hearing of the adventure as they drove home later to change for Mess; partial, because the

thrill of lifting the unknown from the cart was one of the countless things that a man would never dream of putting into words. None the less, Finlay's perceptive brain gathered from the bare facts more than Laurence himself had yet divined; and his smile, as he listened, revealed the tenderness salted with half-cynical humour that characterized his large, tolerant outlook upon men and things.

"I'll dance with her to-night, as sure as Fate," Laurence concluded triumphantly; and fell back upon silence. For the idea called up visions which could only be shared with a cigar, and the deepening mystery of a night wherein all things seemed possible to this man, with the glad, wholesome blood of youth and half-awakened passion racing in his veins.

## CHAPTER IV.

She came,—no more a phantom to adorn
A moment; but an inmate of the heart;
And yet a spirit, there for me enshrined,
To penetrate the lofty and the low.

THERE are few things more distracting to eye and brain than prolonged search for one face in a crowd; and when the face sought for is but a memory of a vision, dimly seen, and when the crowd consists of the shifting whirling units that fill a ball-room, distraction verges on despair.

At least, so it seemed to Laurence, after half an hour of standing about in doorways among groups of men, in and out of uniform, bowing absently to women who clearly expected more of him, and mortally offending others by cutting them dead; while he looked, and listened and hoped, and scribbled a few names on his card, at intervals, leaving impossible gaps for the one partner who mattered, and who might, after all, never turn up.

Three dances had come and gone; and not even the charm of music and motion and the laughter of women had prevailed to entice Laurence from his fantastic search: In vain he jeered at himself for his unconscionable folly. The pursuit of that half-seen face, the desire to recapture and verify the emotion of a moment had become an obsession; a prophetic intimation, to the fulfilment of which he seemed impelled by a force outside himself: the inexorable force that plays havoc with a man's purposes, to his salvation or undoing.

And, as often happens, Laurence found the thing he sought for just as he had decided to give up the quest in despair.

After the third dance he had gone into the coffee-room in disgust returning to the half-empty ball-room just as the pause was over. There was a stir among the bands-

men, the tapping of the conductor's cane; and as Laurence stood eyeing his unpromising card, the voice he would have known among a thousand came clearly to his ears.

For a while he stood transfixed, scarcely able to believe in his good fortune. But there was no mistaking the low-clear tones that seemed to invest the most trivial phrases with tenderness and charm. Then he turned, and saw her—the veiled woman of his dream! Oddly enough she was in blue also; and she stood, not six yards away, talking to Mrs. Rivers, the Commissioner's wife,—a plain, vigorous-looking woman, generously moulded in mind and body. But Laurence had eyes only for the little lady in blue, with the soft brown hair, parting in natural ripples above a wide, clear-skinned forehead, and giving a Madonna-like air of purity to the oval face. Small he knew her to be: but he saw her now as a creature exquisitely finished and proportioned; the long simple lines of her gown, and an unconscious dignity in the poise of her shapely head and throat seeming to add a cubit to her stature. She was, moreover, one of those rare small women who convey a distinct impression of power; power that will reveal itself mainly in a limitless capacity for endurance, and a genius for imparting strength to those who lack it. Nor did a clearer vision of her face belie the voice and profile that had so haunted him since the afternoon's encounter. The rather full oval of cheek and jaw, the nose, delicately aquiline, the eyebrows, wide and curved like a swallow's wing, above great dark eyes, whose colour he could not determine, matched the finish of her person; a finish that might almost have suggested hardness, but for sure promise of passion in the lips, and eyes that might have been set in a soul, rather than in a face, so radiant were they of the light within.

For Laurence, in that instant of revelation, time and place were not. It was as if he had never rightly heard or seen or felt till that moment.

Then the first bars of "La Gitana" roused him: Mrs. Rivers moved away on a partner's arm, leaving the little lady in blue alone; and Laurence, obedient to the formless impulse that dominated him, went forward. card in hand.

She greeted the tall figure in the scarlet mess jacket with a smile that hovered between perplexity and amusement.

"I'm afraid I'm very stupid," she apologized sweetly. "But—do I know you?"

A sudden heat-wave of shyness suffused him. "That depends whether our violent impact this afternoon counts as an introduction!"

She laughed and flushed. "Oh, it's *you!*" she said, her voice lending a suggestion of intimacy to the stressed pronoun. "That makes my stupidity unpardonable! How *can* I make up for it?"

"By giving me some valses!" he answered boldly, his shyness evaporating under her charm like dew in sunlight. "Are you dancing this?"

"No. I don't know a great many people yet."

"That's all right. Nor do I."

She glanced up at him with demure amusement.

"You seem to be a rather original person. And you don't even know who I am!"

"What matter?" he laughed, yielding recklessly to the spirit of adventure that possessed him. "You are *you;* and I am a barbarian from Gilgit, whom you are good enough to dance with. That does for all practical purposes!—Will you come?"

A moment later, his arm was round her, shielding her with practised skill as they glided and circled, to the rhythm of music vibrant with the heart's response to the body's rapture in merely being alive;—the music of the valse.

While it lasted they danced,—swiftly, ecstatically, without speech or pause; and Laurence, looking down upon the ripple of brown hair that almost brushed his shoulder as they turned, knew,—and triumphed in the knowledge, that he had touched the core of life's intensest reality, that the man's heart within him was awake at last. Susceptible and ardent as he was, he had not lived twenty-eight years without experiencing the transient rapture, tinged with young self-importance, of believing himself "in love." But here was no spurious compound of passion and vanity. Here was a leaping flame from the Centric Fire, that in the space of a few hours had created

a new heaven and a new earth. He dreaded the last note that would rob him of his right to hold her, and was struck for the first time by the incongruous element in ball-room ethics:—the fact that so long as the music lasted his encircling arm counted for nothing; while in the pause that followed it would mean no less than the greatest thing in the world.

And when that pause came, as come it must, *what* did he intend to say?

The question brought Finlay to his mind: Finlay the humorous and sagacious, who knew him so much better than he knew himself, who could have told him at a glance that a hundred leaves from the Book of Wisdom would not avail to keep his lips sealed for the space of a month. Well—he should see . . .

But the music was slackening now; and as the last note wailed into silence he released his partner and proffered his arm. She looked up in taking it, her lips just parted, the lace at her breast rising and falling with her quickened breath. For an instant his eyes held hers. He felt as if she must surely read the open secret they proclaimed. But her smile was a thing of pure enjoyment; and Laurence mastered himself, and spoke.

"I couldn't stop till I had to. Hope I haven't tired you?"

"Tired me! It was a revelation! I always loved it, but I've had so little practice; and I never danced like that in my life before. I wish I could feel certain of doing it again!"

"You can feel certain. Only let me have some more, and we'll do it again next time."

"Very well. I should like it of all things," she answered simply.

At one of the doors into the verandah he paused.

"There's a late moon rising; will you come outside for a stroll? Or are you afraid of the cold?"

"No. I don't believe in being afraid of things. It seems like inviting them to harm one. I'm one of the few people who can sit in a draught without knowing it. Probably that's why I never catch cold!"

"Come along out then. Eighteen months of the wilds has taught me to prefer a ceiling of stars to rafters or

whitewashed canvas, when I can get it. Have you ever heard of a place called Gilgit? Or are you too new?"

"Far too new. I've only been out a month. Do tell me about it. Is it in those hills we see from the station?"

"Miles and away beyond them! It's a valley in the Hindu Kush; four hundred miles from the last of the railway; and most of the road beyond Kashmir is a goat track of the vilest."

She drew a deep breath of interest.

"Are there many of you there? And what are you all doing up at the other end of Nowhere?"

"Licking old Kashmir's army into shape; teaching it how to walk and how to hold a gun; seeing that the poor devils are supplied with food and uniforms instead of being robbed of both by local officials at the expense of the State; and generally making the place more civilized and approachable in case of a row."

"By which I suppose you mean a fight?" she questioned, with a small smile, just visible in the light of a distorted moon that climbed the star-strewn spaces of the East; and his answering laugh seemed to bring them closer together. There is nothing like mutual laughter for levelling barriers.

"Yes, I mean India's permanent bogey—a war with Russia. Forgive my mess-room slang. But until just the other day I hadn't spoken to a woman for close on two years."

"Please don't apologize! And—do you believe in the bogey?"

"Not implicitly: but I believe in being prepared, in keeping an eye on Russia's movements in that part of the world. She is creeping down to the Hindu Kush; an arm here, a tentacle there; nominally sport and exploration but we know how much that's worth. And if we want to prevent her from crossing the main range and tampering with the loyalty of the local Chiefs, to say nothing of Kashmir, we must be able to see the other side of the hill. We have wasted a good deal of money, here and there, on Frontier defence. But the Gilgit game's worth the candle, as everyone up there knows. For although no Army could cross the Pamirs. . . ." Sudden self-consciousness tripped him up. "But, good

Heavens, I must be boring you to death, talking Frontier shop in this flagrant fashion."

"Indeed you're not," she protested, transparent sincerity in her tone. "It's all so new to me, and so much more interesting than the snippets of small talk with which men unconsciously insult us, when they feel called upon to make themselves agreeable! Please be kind, and tell me a great deal more."

Thus encouraged, he took up his tale again, without misgiving; his natural gift of speech and his keen young interest in the big game he was helping to play stimulated by the presence of that rarity among women—a born listener, who made her sympathy felt without a persistent interlarding of question and comment.

Of so little account is Time, in the soul's calendar, that, in less than ten minutes both had forgotten the fact that they were strangers, ignorant of each other's identity; and when at length the sound of music drew them back into the verandah, to find the Mikado Lancers in full swing, Laurence boldly suggested that they should sit it out and dance the next.

"But I may be engaged!" she objected, smiling.

"Oh no, you mustn't be. That would spoil everything."

His boyish eagerness clearly amused her.

"I don't believe I am."

"That's a mercy! No need to consult your card. We'll find two chairs and put them at the edge of the verandah; or you'll be tired out before our dance begins."

"I doubt it. But chairs would be nice. And you'll tell me more about Gilgit and Kashmir?"

"As much as ever you please."

They found two chairs and set them in full view of the moon's orange-tawny splendour. But the interruption seemed in some way to have broken the gossamer threads of new-made intimacy: and Laurence,—able to lean back and feast his eyes upon the outline of her profile, that gleamed upon a background of purple shadow—found his former easy flow of talk tripped up by a sudden overwhelming humility: twin spirit of a great love. So they lapsed into occasional silences, more dangerous and delectable than speech; and in the intervals spoke mainly of India and the countless problems she suggests

to thoughtful minds. It was after some talk of the natives themselves, and the girl's confession that she had not yet conquered an instinctive distaste and dread with which they had inspired her from the first, that she broke a rather protracted silence with an abrupt request.

"Of course I'm abysmally ignorant—you've discovered that already! But I want to know exactly what people mean by a half-caste; and why the word so often goes with a tone of contempt?"

Laurence shrugged his shoulders, as though the subject were hardly worth dilating on, except that she wished it.

"Well—I suppose one has no business to be contemptuous," he said. "But the half-caste out here falls between two stools, that's the truth. He has the misfortune to be neither white nor brown; and he is generally perverse enough to pick the worst qualities of the two races, and mix them into a product peculiarly distasteful to both. The Anglo-Indian's contempt of him is a mild affair compared with the scorn of the high-caste native, who regards him simply as a low-born, a creature without either the birthright of caste, or the prestige of Sahib-dom. Seems hard luck on the poor devils; but they really are a most unsatisfactory crew on the whole. Clever enough, some of 'em: but there's a want of grit in their constitutions, physical and moral. It's a bad business all round; the mixing of brown and white races in marriage."

She gave a small fastidious shiver of disgust and spoke, looking out across the Club gardens where the moonlight was steadily encroaching upon fathomless pools of shadow.

"I didn't know—that kind of thing happened nowadays. And I can't imagine how any man with English ideals and English blood in his veins could wish to marry the sort of woman one sees about here."

"No more can I," he answered, his own gaze resting upon the only conceivable wife in the world. "And they don't now; at least not one in a thousand. But in the Mutiny days, or earlier, when men were stuck out here for half their service, it was another matter. One can't blame them. It is not good for man to be alone. But their descendants have had to pay heavily for that simple fact. It's not race prejudice that puts one off. Per-

sonally, I like Asiatics. I've found fine fellows among them—Hindu and Mahommedan. Its the fatality of mixing such mighty opposites in marriage; and the white man's distaste for the half-breed all the world over. *I* can't stand 'em. Insularism, perhaps. But there's no getting over it."

"Poor things. One feels sorry for them. But still—" Again that small movement of distaste. "I suppose I'm insular too—are they on the same social footing out here as ourselves?"

"H'm n-no. Not quite. As a rule, you see, they fill inferior positions. Here and there one of the better sort rises in the scale and gets the benefit of his official rank. But socially they always have a good deal of the kind of prejudice you and I understand to fight against, or live down. The trouble is that nowadays that sort of Eurasian often goes home for a part of his education; falls in love with some unsuspecting English girl, and brings her out without giving her a ghost of a notion how the land lies. It would be interesting to know what happens when she *does* find out. There's a case in this very station now. A Police chap I'm stopping with—a walking encyclopedia of family histories—was telling me about it only yesterday. A Staff Corps Doctor, up on special plague duty; and just back from long leave. A clever fellow. Quite one of the better kind. But for all that—a pure half-breed, though I doubt if his wife guesses it, unless facts or people have enlightened her by this time. Hard on a girl, don't you think so?"

He turned his gaze from the garden where he had been idly watching another couple who defied the cold, and found, to his vexation that she had leaned back, so that her face was in shadow and could scarcely be seen.

"Is he—do you mean that his mother was—a native?"

"A Hindu, O'Gorman said. The father was a Scotch tea-planter. Buried alive in a district scores of miles from anywhere: and no doubt going half mad with loneliness, poor chap. I believe the son's not a bad chap really. But unluckily for him, the Hindu lady consoled herself with a Eurasian, when her Planter died, and he's got an impossible half-sister on his hands. The women are apt to be worse than the men; and Peshawur's such a

cliquey place that a new arrival stranded in a household of that kind, may have rather a poor time of it here. Makes me feel mad with the fellow. *I* shall go and call on her straight.—Hullo! there's our dance striking up. We mustn't miss a note of it. Come on."

She rose and took his arm without a word. But the fact did not surprise him. He already recognised her gift of silence as an integral part of her charm. But on entering the ball-room, he glanced down at her face, and its pallor dismayed him. He fancied he detected a line of sternness about the tender lips; and she was looking straight before her into the crowd, apparently oblivious of his existence, which was more disconcerting than all. He leaned down to her, and his low tone was tenderer than he knew.

"Not feeling ill, are you?"

She started visibly.

"Ill? What nonsense."

"Quite sure you want to dance this straight through?"

"Quite sure!"

This time she smiled; and the cloud on his "heaven of blue" evaporated as he slipped an arm round her, and swept her once more, into the heart of ecstasy. But it is written that a man may not bathe twice in the same spring, nor drink twice from the same cup of rapture: and the dance was little more than half over when Laurence felt his partner stumble and almost slip out of his arms. Instinctively her fingers clutched his sleeve, and he only saved her from falling by tightening his grasp and drawing her out of the throng. Then they stood still: but since she clearly needed support he did not altogether withdraw his arm.

"What happened? Are you in pain?" he asked anxiously. Her face was very white now; and her lips close-set.

"Yes. It does hurt a little," she confessed. "It must have been an uneven board. Anyway, I've twisted my ankle; and I sprained it not long ago, which doesn't improve matters. I'm afraid there's an end of my dancing to-night. I knew I shouldn't do it again!" she added, trying to smile.

"You will later on. We'll have plenty more chances,"

he urged, with less than his usual confidence, because by Love's intuition he divined that she suffered more than physical pain. "May I take you to your mother?"

"My mother?" She drew in a quick breath. "My mother is in England. Take me to the Ladies' Room, please."

"You won't have a glass of wine?"

"No—no, thank you."

She limped beside him silently till they reached their destination.

"Mayn't I get your carriage and come back for you?" he asked.

"How kind you are! It's only a *tikka gharri*. Number 99."

He turned from the closed door with bewildered forebodings at his heart, despatched a *kitmutgar* for the carriage, and was back at his post when she reappeared. Supporting her to the ungainly box on wheels that is the "cab" of Northern India, he helped her in and stood a moment, holding the open door; shy of speech, yet loath to let her go without discovering her name.

"Are you really all right by yourself?" he asked.

"Quite all right!" she answered, with something of her old serenity. "Thank you so much for teaching me to dance, and looking after me so well. Would you complete your kindness by finding my husband, and telling him I have hurt my ankle and gone home. Say it's nothing much, please; and that I'll send the carriage back."

"Your—your husband?" the man stammered, his left hand closing like a vice upon the wood-work of the door, while the ruins of his enchanted castle crashed about his brain.

"Yes—Dr. Videlle.—Good-night."

## CHAPTER V.

> Like the earth itself, and the race of men, the life of the spirit is born with shuddering also and tears.
>
> —M. P. W.

STUNNED and bewildered by the double shock, Alan Laurence stood motionless, looking out into the darkness that had engulfed his vision of a day; a vision which in that short space had lifted him to the stature of manhood, had given into his hands the master-key to the riddle of life. Given? Yes; but at a price. Free gifts have no place in this world's economics. For every gift the gods exact toll to the uttermost farthing; and men, who live not by bread alone, are little apt to haggle over the transaction.

> "What matter the price? We would pay it again.
> We have lived, we have loved, we have known!"

It is the intimate cry of hearts that have been through the fire. But Laurence, standing on the threshold of love and knowledge, felt only the hot resentment of youth that asks for bread and is given a stone.

He had come down for his short holiday resolved to drink deep of the cup of enjoyment; and lo, at the outset tragedy confronted him; not his own merely, but hers; and to do him justice this last—emphasized by exasperation at his own unwitting blunder—troubled him most. Enlightened by love, he had read it in her eyes. Her manner of leaving also, and her message to Videlle, had revealed more than she had stayed to consider in her blind longing to be alone. His own words came back to him. "It would be interesting to know what will happen when she *does* find out." Interesting—to the point of anguish! But from what he had divined of her, he felt morally certain that neither he nor the little world of Peshawur would ever know.

The sound of music roused him; a mockery now,

rather than a lure. No place on earth so dismal as a ball-room to a heart jarred out of tune. Like his wild brother of the woods, the wounded human shrinks from contact with the unscathed. Videlle could wait for his message. It would give her more time to face facts, poor little soul. How cruelly he must have hurt her! The memory of his egregious frankness, of statement and comment, jarred all the natural tenderness and chivalry that made him incapable of unkind or even tactless speech; stung him to helpless rage at the subtle irony of it all. As for possible partners, he never gave them a thought; but because movement of some sort was imperative, he made for the gate with long strides, and walked rapidly down the road, along which he had driven, with so high a heart, less than two hours ago. Gradually the storm of pain and wrath subsided. Night, with her large grave aloofness, laid a cool hand upon him; and the still small voice of Common-sense counselled return.

Having lost all sense of time, it seemed to him that by now the dance must be almost over. But on reaching the ball-room, he found to his disgust that the band-master's card registered number nine for the valse then in progress. Mechanically, he drew out his own; and at the same moment a high thin voice at his elbow startled him, jarring his sensitized nerves. Turning quickly, he was confronted by an eye-searing vision in scarlet; a woman on the wrong side of forty, obviously of the "smart" persuasion; her thin face dominated by an aggressive nose; a scarlet aigrette springing, flame-like, from the elaborate puffs and coils of her hair. She rejoiced in the name of Berkeley-Kerr; wielded it, rather, as a weapon; and woe betide the unfortunate who forgot the hyphen, or divorced Berkeley from Kerr! Still worse was the case of Finlay, the incorrigible, who—regardless of her connection by marriage with the one and only "Corps" in creation—had dared to christen her "the Burkley Kurr." It had reached her ears, of course; everything did; and had set him permanently beyond the pale, to his open amusement and relief. Laurence she had known, and appropriated in half-fledged, Roorkee days; and the joy of meeting again was a more one-sided affair than she supposed.

"Well, of *all* the casual partners!" . . . she apostrophized him now, with a flash of white teeth, and boldly handsome green eyes. "Gilgit seems to have ruined your manners! And your behaviour to the only Sapper's wife in the station doesn't say *much* for your *esprit de corps*. First you cut me dead; and then you cut half my dance. Was she so *very* fascinating that you never heard it begin?"

This last, delivered archly, put the finishing touch to his discomfiture. He was in no humour for chaff or italics; and Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr revelled in both. For once his natural ease of manner deserted him. He explained, none too lucidly, that his partner having hurt her foot, he had naturally seen her into her carriage. "And by the way," he added, fired with hope of escape, "I was to take a message for her, to—Dr. Videlle."

She raised her eyebrows at the name.

"*When* this is over!" she decreed, with a glance that lingered.

"Why, of course," he acquiesced, chafing inwardly.

Then they danced:—or rather Laurence danced, and Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr assiduously hindered him. No ecstasy this time. No pulse of passion in the music. Only brass instruments, and feet that seemed to be inviting him to trample on them. She moved stiffly too, as if her joints needed oiling—the irreverent thought was his!—and nothing so mild as valsing could intercept the flow of interjection and italics. Had it only been a polka, Laurence reflected, he would have robbed her of breath without compunction. But not until the placable duel was over did she allude to the heroine of the damaged foot.

"So you know Mrs. Videile, already?"

"Yes. Do you?"

She was not the woman to miss the unconscious note of eagerness.

"*And* you are already smitten—*épris!*" she asserted conclusively, ignoring the question. "She *is* just the sort of insignificant little bit of virtue that men fall down and worship. But *still!* . . . I hope to goodness you don't mean to insult me and belittle the Corps by dangling after a half-caste Doctor's wife. It would be such atrociously bad form; and you'll find plenty of married

women, of the right sort, willing to dance and ride with you to any extent."

But Laurence sat looking straight ahead of him; the kindly blue eyes grown suddenly stern.

"Thanks. It's uncommonly kind of them. But I'm not keen on dangling about after other men's wives."

She greeted his statement with the perpetual, meaningless laugh that acquaintances mistook for geniality, and that had driven a good-natured husband to the verge of hypochondria.

"Dear me—how sententious we've become! Is it Gilgit and your rigid Colonel Lenox, or just a pose to suit a bigger moustache, and a frontier billet?" And without awaiting enlightenment, she rattled on undismayed.

"Probably a month of Peshawur and Mrs. Videlle will cure you! They came out with us—the Videlles, I mean; and of course, in a place like this, one *knew* how it would be! Though, if it weren't for the awful sister-in-law, one might overlook the man. He's harmless, and unsociable. She's the reverse; of course Mrs. Rivers is taking up the wife. Her favourite pose. And I'm sure *I've* tried to be kind to the poor little thing. Had her to tennis,—on a *mixed* day; but the Vansittart woman calmly appropriated the invite, and made herself *so* conspicuous that one simply *couldn't* do it again. She'll propose to you, as sure as fate, my dear boy, if you're foolish enough to go to the house more than once or twice. . . ."

And so forth, *ad lib.*, *da capo;* till Laurence whose blood boiled at the note of patronage flavoured with contempt, succeeded in steering the onrush of talk towards other subjects; succeeded finally in escaping to the card-room in a reprehensibly blasphemous frame of mind.

Here he found Finlay, whose dances were few and far between. At another table sat Videlle,—an inveterate player; his clean-cut features, and eyes, more green than brown, touched with the melancholy, the aloofness of the Asiatic. Laurence could not deny the man good looks—of a sort. But eyeballs tinged with yellow, and the too brilliant flash of white, under a blue-black moustache, set his insular prejudice on edge; and he transacted his business with all speed, emphasizing the little lady's

request that Videlle would not hurry home on her account. Whereat the other's face darkened, and he returned rather hastily to his interrupted game.

Finlay—an interested on-looker—rose from a completed rubber as Laurence drew near—a changed Laurence with the sunlight blotted out of his eyes.

"Why, Larry, what's up?" he asked under his breath.

"It's all up. I'm off at once. I'll send back the cart."

This was mystifying and evidently serious; but Finlay instinctively avoided the tragic note.

"Nonsense, man. You're coming in to supper with me," he said, and the tone was kinder than the words. "Nothing beats turkey and champagne for altering values and perspectives. There's the call to food sounding now. The finest tune of the evening! Go ahead, like a good chap, and pick a quiet corner, if there is one, while I settle with old Blunderbore."

For an instant Laurence looked him in the eyes, almost —Finlay thought—as if he meant to knock him down; then, with an inarticulate sound, turned on his heel and went out.

Finlay, joining him soon after, found him established at a stray small table—the two other chairs turned down—drinking champagne out of a long tumbler, an untasted shred of sandwich adorning his plate. Finlay righted one of the chairs, and sat down.

"Easy with the 'fizz,' Larry. Give the rest of us a chance!" he said with his rarest smile,—the one that transfigured his ugly face.

"Thought I'd try your recipe for altering values!" the other answered—emptying his glass.

"Quite so. Only I think I mentioned turkey!"

"You did. But I've no use for it. Hi, Kitmutgar—*aur Simpkin láo.*"*

By now the supper room was a cheerful pandemonium; clatter of knives and tongues; the shout of flying champagne corks and of impatient men. As Laurence emptied his tumbler Finlay leaned forward and touched his arm.

"Steady on, dear old boy. This is no place for intimate talk. But pull yourself together, and tell me in half a dozen words what's wrong."

* "Bring more champagne."

"Two are enough," Laurence answered bitterly. "She's *married*." Champagne bubbled and laughed into his tumbler; and he drank again—thirstily. "That's the chap—that d——d half caste I spoke to. Married her at home, without telling her the truth; and I went and let it out with brutal directness, through not knowing her name."

"But my dear chap . . . ?"

"Oh, yes. . . . I was a headlong fool. . . ." He frowned and glanced back at a couple settling into their seats close behind, with much laughter and scraping of chairs. "This is no place for details, as you said. You've got the bare facts, and God knows they're bad enough."

Finlay screwed his lips into a soundless whistle. Bad enough, indeed! For a man of Alan's temperament they might even spell tragedy. The main question was, how far had he let himself go? That would transpire later.

In the meantime, with a nod of understanding, he devoted himself to the first necessity of life; noting with satisfaction that Laurence mechanically followed suit. The bitterest heartache on earth is no match for the healthy hunger of eight and twenty. Incessant demands for champagne were less reassuring; but, for the moment, best ignored. They spoke little; and the rising tide of hilarity rippled and sparkled over their silence like wavelets over black rocks. Suddenly Laurence pushed aside his plate.

"Are you game to go after this?" he asked.

"H'm . . . yes; if you'll wait till number twelve is over."

"Who is it?"

"Miss Rivers." And his tone was as coolly matter of fact as if the dance were not the sole event of the evening, since the passing of number seven, against which the same initials were neatly inscribed.

"All right. I'll wait."

"Come along and dance too. It'll do you good."

"Not a bit of it. I'll smoke outside, till you come."

Throughout the drive silence held them. Too intimate to "make talk," both shrank, man-like, from the one topic of moment: Finlay because night air and quiet are

unfailing panaceas for heated blood; Laurence because he dared not risk speech—yet.

It needed pipes and pegs, and the familiar peace and untidiness of their joint living-room to bring out the story in full. Finlay had himself dispensed the whisky with a sparing hand, ignoring muttered protest, and moving a finger and thumb absently up and down the bottle, while Laurence spoke—in curt, clipped sentences, more heart-stirring than curses and groans—of his headlong fall from the heights; of the possible tragedy shadowing the woman he loved; and of that which rankled more than all—his own blunt method of precipitating events. Finlay, listening in a pained silence, ransacked his brain for the apt word of counsel or comfort, so seldom spoken rightly at the right moment.

"It's a crooked, desperate sort of business all round," was his final comment. "And I'm afraid the only physic for *your* complaint, Larry, is five grains of common-sense with ten of self-control. Bitter stuff. But the best there is."

The reply to this was indistinguishable. Laurence had leaned an elbow on the table, one hand shading his eyes; and Finlay went on with the unshrinking coolness of the surgeon for whom the knife is an instrument of healing: "To start with, don't make matters worse by upsetting yourself needlessly over Mrs. Videlle's discovery; or your own share in it. For after all, she had to know it one day. She won't like her first taste of bitter bread. But it's a form of rations served out to most of us, one time or another; and the chances are that she is—in love with her husband." He deliberately stressed the words. "In any case, you've got to knock the fact into your head that she is another man's wife; that her private joys and sorrows are no concern of yours, and never can be. Fact, the best thing you can do is to leave the station and go off shooting somewhere; or spend a few months in Pindi, and make yourself agreeable to the girls. You may think it's useless; but . . ."

He got no further; for Laurence pushed back his chair and rose; hands plunged in pockets, shoulders square.

"Tell you what, Finlay, you're going ahead too fast

altogether. Its infernal bad luck of course. But I hope I'm man enough to stand my ground and face it out. As for throwing up all my plans and going to Pindi"—he laughed bitterly—"you might as well suggest a ticket to the moon!"

With that, he swung out of the room and Finlay heard him pacing the verandah like a spirit in prison. Then he released the whisky bottle, and leaning back in his chair, pulled long and pensively at his pipe; a great pain in his eyes; and in his heart an impotent rebellion against the decree that the elder, however badly burnt at the fire of life, shall by no means be allowed to snatch the younger from the flame that purifies or destroys.

In this case—which? Finlay asked himself, and found no immediate answer. In the main, Alan's impulses were towards good; but for all his insight, Finlay had not yet discovered how far mere impulse was rooted in the basic elements of all great character—duty, principle, religion; and, because uncertainty is the life-blood of all human interest, this unknown quantity in his friend made him supremely attractive to Finlay's speculative turn of mind. At a crisis like the present, it made also for acute anxiety as to how he would fare in the unequal duel between Destiny and the soul. In any case, it seemed to Finlay a refinement of cruelty that a man manifestly made for the worshipful service of wife and children—should be debarred by Love itself from that which, deep down, he valued more than all,—the soft touches, the inspiring devotion of a woman.

Shrewdly aware of these things, he had greatly desired for his friend the consummation from which in all honesty he believed himself cut off. Lack of this world's gear, and a certain ludicrous quality in his ugliness seemingly condemned him to the detached rôle of the onlooker, who takes nothing very seriously, himself least of all. Not often is a man thus castigated by his own satiric humour. But Finlay's attitude, in this respect, was not unlike that of the immortal Cyrano, whose tragedy he had never read. That the big heart within this battered casket should have been bestowed irrevocably upon tall Gwen Rivers, with the light of morning in her golden-brown eyes, and the buoyancy of it in step and carriage, was only of a piece

with human folly as he knew it. But at least it behoved him to conceal his own contribution to the sum of it, like a vice; and for nearly a year he had acted on this Spartan conviction with a stoicism quite out of date in an age of promiscuous self-indulgence. An established friendship with her mother kept him within the charmed circle; and until the right man claimed her—an event already looming ahead—he could and did sun himself in her sweet companionship as often as discretion would allow. Yet the man was no fool. He was merely modest and clear-sighted enough to recognise that a Staff Corps Captain, with no particular prospects, ugly, penniless, and over forty, was no congruous suitor for radiant one and twenty, with a Commissioner for father, and the world at her feet. And the pride, that often goes with modesty, had restrained him so far from deliberately courting either his lady's pity or disdain.

But the familiar ache of his own discouragement shrank to insignificance beside the trial in store for Laurence, all untutored as he was in the harsh school of life; and those footsteps in the verandah fell like blows upon his heart. Poor dear old chap! If only he would listen to reason, and recognise the courage of running away; a form of courage that rarely appeals to a man. But Finlay's dread of the married-woman complication, so unusual in an Anglo-Indian, sprang from that early tragic experience, which had left a deeper mark on him than it would have done upon a nature as detached as he professed to be. Would it help matters at all, he wondered, if he did violence to his reserve, and unearthed a tragedy dead and buried these ten years? Would the concrete instance startle Laurence into fuller cognizance of possible rocks ahead? The footsteps in the verandah seemed to answer, "No"; and because the masculine mind leans always towards letting well, and even ill, alone, he accepted their verdict. Laurence was clearly in no mood for further opposition; and after all much depended on Mrs. Videlle's attitude towards her husband, and his connection with the country. He would wait and watch them together before dragging into light the story of a weak, misguided woman, best forgotten.

On that decision, he rose and went to the door.

"Come along in, Larry," he said gently. "Time you were in bed; and you'll sleep, though you mayn't think it."

Laurence obeyed; and the sight of his face, tense and desperate, smote the older man to fresh anxiety.

"You have quite decided to stay?" he asked tentatively.

"Of course, I have. Why not? Bolting at sight isn't part of the programme. And I'll not be persuaded into it,—even for the sake of a woman."

Finlay's smile was compact of pity and admiration for the royal self-confidence of the strong, young nature that has never resisted unto blood.

"If that's how you feel about it, old chap," he said, on a rare note of gravity, "stay by all means, and test your strength."

He refrained from adding the cheap cynicism that in many cases the best antidote for infatuation is familiarity with the adored. And, since Laurence had decided to take the risk, Mrs. Videlle herself became the crucial point of interest to Finlay's mind. If only she happened to be genuinely in love with her husband, the cloud on the horizon might evaporate after all.

## CHAPTER VI.

Un hasard nous revèle à nous mêmes.—Albalat.

But, unhappily for all concerned, Lyndsay Videlle was not genuinely in love with her husband; though she had married him in that belief seven months earlier: a belief induced by her own scant experience of life, and encouraged by the twofold importunity of Circumstance and the Man. For, given certain conditions, the lover who convinces a girl, of swift and tender sympathies, that she is dearer to him than his soul, and who refuses to take a first or even a second "No" for answer, can—and too often does—succeed in generating a responsive emotion, which she may well mistake for minted gold. Such, at least, had been the case of Lyndsay Videlle. And six months of marriage—spent in making her first acquaintance with Switzerland and the Alps—had not enlightened her. Videlle had gone warily, knowing well that the entire woman had yet to be won; and, in her, discernment was hindered by a natural gift of idealization, a touch of other-worldliness, inclining her to see all things through a radiant mist.

But to-night, as she lay alone in the dark, smarting under the sting of a revelation innately repellent to her, a revelation implying deliberate deceit, her swift strong repulsion of feeling startled her into fuller knowledge. To-night she saw her marriage, at last, for the thing it was:—a house founded upon sand; saw her love also for the white fervour of imagination rather than the red fervour of the heart.

Ever since her coming to Peshawur, a vague dread had shadowed her content, dread of a false step irrevocably taken; and now the flashlight of truth had translated fear into certainty. For Videlle's account of himself did not tally with that which Laurence had given, and which confirmed all too clearly the haunting suspicion that had goaded her into speech. Her shy questionings before marriage had elicited the statements that his father came

of an old Highland family, and had cut himself off from them by marriage with a foreigner—a Spaniard, whom they chose to consider beneath him, and of whom Videlle professed small recollection since she had died before he was five years old.

Now—enlightened by her new knowledge—Lyndsay confronted unflinchingly all that had been; all that had secretly disturbed and puzzled her on closer acquaintance with her husband: and, in the first access of anger and disgust, she came near to hatred of the man who could so flagrantly lie to her;—a fierce, half scornful hatred, not to be mistaken for the other side of love. For a vehement spirit dwelt in that small body; a spirit repressed and controlled only by the drop of Covenanting blood in her veins. The father, who delighted in her, had once likened her nature to an opal—the woman-stone he called it—with its iridescent mingling of milk and fire; apt symbol, to his poetic fancy, of purity transpierced with living passion. Of such was his Lyndsay; and his pride in her had irradiated the dark places of his life. The memory of his sudden and terrible death assailed her like a fresh turn of the thumbscrew; and with it came the old, unanswerable question—what, and where was he now? Was his spirit, that had so loved and understood her own, still mysteriously in touch with it, seeing and grieving over the pass to which the loss of him had brought her? Or was he—*nowhere?* In the void that enfolds us like a garment—yet seems so immeasurably beyond our ken—is there no pulsing and throbbing of hidden life? The bare possibility chilled her blood. But she knew that the Doctor in him had leaned to this belief; while the Poet clung instinctively to the "larger hope."

For he had been a country Doctor, this man of brilliant instability and strange contrasts, that made for charm of personality rather than for success in life. This last had been further checked by an early marriage no less fatal to happiness than Lyndsay's own seemed likely to become;—one of those galling errors of youth that the years emphasize rather than condone. For the girl who, at one and twenty, had seemed no more than pleasantly sensible and self-poised had crystallized into a woman hard, passionless, dominant; a woman with whom Dick

Vereker had scarcely a taste or a thought in common. His only son had proved a replica of his mother; and not until his third daughter emerged from babyhood had he found the true comrade of his spirit; a nature curiously unlike his own, yet Vereker to the roots of her being.

As she grew older Lyndsay had slipped instinctively into the place her mother had not cared to keep; had inspired and criticised the fantastically powerful poems, scribbled in rare moments of leisure; and despised by his wife as unprofitable, though they had won him high appreciation from the elect. Thus, these two had grown into one another as only the mentally isolated can; building up for themselves, within the four walls of Vereker's study, a world of thought and aspiration far removed from the petty personalities of village life in a remote corner of Wiltshire. For the monopolizing instinct of the egoist had led Vereker to rear this lovable daughter of his with a keener eye to his own needs than to her future welfare. Deliberately he had fashioned her to be a worshipful devotee of himself and his art; a solace and refreshment when he returned wearied out with combating disease and death, and the human ignorance and folly that are hot-beds of both. To this end he had been zealous in shielding her from contact with rough realities; desiring to keep her as a "garden enclosed," and fully intending to stand, as long as might be, between her and marriage. As for the possible effect of his training on her after life, apart from himself, intensely as he loved her, he had probably never given it a thought. On the rare occasions when the doctor could afford a holiday, it was an understood thing that Mrs. Vereker and three daughters went in one direction, Lyndsay and her father in another; and it was on one of these delightfully Bohemian outings, at a Cornish fishing village, that they had foregathered with James Videlle, also a Doctor, in the Indian Army, home on long leave. In England his colour—noticeably dark enough to suggest Southern blood—was rather an attraction than otherwise; and Vereker, finding him gentlemanly, clever and something of a Sanskrit scholar, struck up an impulsive intimacy with him: thus sealing Lyndsay's fate. Before Videlle left he had proposed and been rejected with decision, to Vereker's

secret relief. Home without Lyndsay was a calamity he could not face even in imagination. He hated that luckless Doctor, and never wished to set eyes on him again. Nor did he; for two months later he was snatched out of life, in the fullness of vigour, by an accident due to his own reckless horsemanship; leaving his "little Lyndsay" not only heartbroken, but maimed, helpless as a bird with one wing.

Videlle heard of it; and took fresh heart of grace. Realizing something of the close comradeship between father and daughter, he saw, in Lyndsay's utter isolation, a possible stepping-stone to achievement.

After waiting five months, he assailed her with an urgent plea that she would reconsider her decision before his leave was up. Her refusal this time was tinged with regret. Vereker had left little money and many debts; and Lyndsay's unique education, having fostered the woman rather than the worker, she found herself flung alone upon the world, hopelessly out of touch with her hard-natured mother and sisters, and with neither capacity nor desire for the unattached existence of the "bachelor girl."

No modern woman this, blown to and fro by conflicting winds of the spirit, but one framed for the creation of home and children; for the delectable companionship of true marriage,—rarest of all earthly achievements! Her slowly awakening heart, robbed of its one absorbing interest, cried out for escape from the narrow groove that hemmed it in; for the satisfying of the mother-instinct that was the keystone of her character—an instinct implanted by Nature for her own great ends; yet ignored, or tabooed as "indelicate" by the conventional-minded; who cherish the delusion that they can extinguish a living truth by the simple process of looking the other way.

Thus the stars in their courses fought for Videlle. Loneliness, natural instinct, and the weakness that follows upon sharp suffering, constrained the girl into a passing conviction that she needed the man, when in truth she needed love. The very accident of his profession was a point in his favour. This he perceived clearly enough. But for him the means were nothing; the end was all.

Ignorant of love's volcanic element, of the compelling force that overturns laws and moralities, as an avalanche

overturns a ninety-foot pine, Lyndsay Vereker, encouraged by Videlle, had mistaken the natural woman's response to another's passionate need, for the love that is no response, but a great giving; a radiator from the deathless fires that glow at the heart of life. Repressed and undemonstrative by nature, her slight distaste for caresses, given or taken, troubled her no whit. She supposed everyone did not care for that sort of thing. And by now her husband believed her a cold woman, incapable of ardent feeling; whereas an ardour—finer, deeper than his own—still slept in her, like a chrysalis in its silken sheath. Not until the moment of awakening would she realize the full enormity of her mistake; the wrong done, unwittingly, not only to her husband but to herself, and one other,—the appointed awakener, who, unhappily for the race of men, is so rarely appointed to arrive at the given moment.

Her four weeks in India had been weeks of disillusion and bewilderment that had struck the deeper because they must needs be carefully suppressed. The dusty untidy house, crammed with objectless trivialities, offended her taste; the superfluity of native servants, whom she could neither question nor command, oppressed and repelled her; while Jim's widowed half-sister—who, in true Oriental fashion, had settled herself and her only son upon him since her husband's death,—completed the unwelcome state of things, to which Lyndsay must needs adjust herself as best she might. But for all her fine qualities of brain and heart she lacked the ready adaptability so necessary for life in India. A fastidious love of daintily ordered surroundings made the dilapidated house, with its ill-fitting doors, and down-at-heel aspect, anathema to her; while Carrie Vansittart's presence robbed her of a woman's natural joy in making a home that shall express her own individual sense of the beauty and fitness of things. Moreover, the widow herself was frankly—unspeakable. For once Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr had not over-coloured the truth. Her large shapeless figure, her strident voice, thick, assertive nose, and fleshy forcible chin had repelled poor Lyndsay at the outset; and a month under one roof had only widened the gulf between natures as antipodal as the East and West for which they

stood. To make matters worse there was the nine-year-old boy—Montgomery, alias Monty—a creature physically and morally invertebrate; sallow and overgrown, with furtive eyes, and an unchecked propensity for passing his days between the back verandah and the servants' houses.

Small wonder that Lyndsay, with her English instincts and ideals, had been alienated and filled with puzzled forebodings, which had not been allayed by glimpses into other Peshawur homes.

Slowly, painfully, the suspicion had forced itself into her mind that there must be something wrong with Jim and Carrie, and the egregious "Monty," whose half-fledged personality jarred her nerves like a false chord. Neither her inexperience, nor her tendency to live in the clouds, could blind her to the fact that Jim's half-sister and her son were not of gentle birth. Worse still, a host of distressing trifles suggested a more vital connection with the country than mere living in India could explain. Could she be what people called a half-caste, Lyndsay had wondered. And if so, what, exactly, did that imply? She had spoken once of her mother's recent death. But Jim had volunteered no information about his father's second wife. Surely men did not marry women of the country in these days? Pride and loyalty restrained Lyndsay from putting such a question to anyone who might connect it with herself. For quickened observation had bred a fresh perplexity, worse than all. She had begun to detect, in her husband, a faint echo of the very traits that hinted at Eastern blood in Carrie's veins, She had dismissed the idea as imaginary; and had tried not to see the self-evident. But the unnamed foreboding had haunted her, poisoning the new life from which she had hoped so much; and now, in half an hour's talk with a stranger, the truth had been sprung upon her,—naked, unlovely, galling to her innate fastidiousness and to the pride of race that burned in her like a steady flame;—the truth that the mother of the man she called "husband" had been no Spaniard but a Hindu; a woman born in the smoke-grimmed squalor of a native hut; reared in an atmosphere of ignorance and superstition; just such an one, perhaps, in old age, as the very ayah who served her; a garrulous creature, yellow and wrinkled, with the

red of betel-nut on lips and hands, from whose touch Lyndsay still shrank with unreasoning distaste. For it was his mother who had remarried. Her early death had been a fiction—like the rest. "How much of the rest?" she asked herself bitterly;—she who craved truth before all things in human relations. Already she had been jarred by her husband's tendency to "cut corners" when confronted with awkward facts. But that he should have deliberately taken advantage of her ignorance and trust in him, her loss of the only parent likely to make awkward enquiries, set her tingling with a hot scorn and resentment that could find no relief in tears, no outlet in action or burning words.

And yet—and yet—? Surely something must be done. Such facts could not be accepted without comment or remonstrance, and the thread of life picked up again as though her talk with Laurence had never been. Her every instinct rebelled against such a course. In the beginning she had at least been justified by belief in a beautiful illusion. But loveless marriage held to in the teeth of physical repulsion seemed to her a desecration of the Holiest—no less. For all that, the fact of her bondage remained. Escape from personal contact was conceivable; but legally and morally there could be no escape from this man, who had deceived her on a matter vitally affecting her happiness. Had she known the strong-fired devotion of wife to husband, or had her recoil from the East been fraught with less of unreasoning repulsion, the discovery itself had been a painful interlude—no more. But when marriage lacks the sanctifying element, minor calamities will assume tragic proportions undreamed of in love's philosophy.

And behind all, worse than all, the deliberate deceit struck at the most vital part of her feeling for him. Even were the lie itself a thing of naught, the spirit that could will to deceive remained; a spirit that freezes at its source the well-springs of love and trust.

So to-night, in her supreme hour of misery and indecision, a host of grey to-morrows crowded in upon Lyndsay's brain, till the glow of anger faded into the chill of despair; and despair itself was dissolved in the blessed oblivion of sleep.

## CHAPTER VII.

I take the hap
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills the sails
Propels: but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked?
I know the Devil has sufficient weight
To bear; I lay it not on him, or Fate.
—MEREDITH.

SHE woke with a start to find the first pallor of morning filtering down through the shadows, from the spider-haunted window slits fifteen feet up the wall; woke to the ache of remembrance that to-day decision would be thrust upon her—decision the most momentous that could be required of a right-minded woman. But the dead weight upon brain and eyelids told her that she had only hung upon the edge of sleep. With an effort she roused herself; and the lurking question sprang out upon her—what next? Ignoring its deeper significance, she decided simply to get up at once, and go for a canter on the race-course; shelving all thought of practical issues till the sane, vivifying influences of food and fresh air had restored that sense of proportion which night and misery so disastrously destroy.

Her right ankle was still stiff and painful. She had made the most of it overnight for her own ends; but riding, at least, would put no strain upon it.

Slipping cautiously out of bed, she stood looking down upon the man whose duplicity and selfish love had wrecked her slender chance of happiness. She was not angry with him any more. Where was the use? Her main feeling with regard to him was a half pitying disgust —which was worse, because in all likelihood it would endure.

Yet James Videlle possessed some lovable qualities, if none that were admirable. The very strain of weakness in him—manifest in the sensuous indecision of the lips,

the poor outline of chin and jaw—appealed irresistibly to her own strength, to the mother spirit which had been partially responsible for her marriage. And as she watched him her whole face softened. Sudden tears pricked her eyeballs. But her tenderness was transient. The memory of a certain incident during his courtship expelled it from her heart:—a day when she had asked him, diffidently, of his people, his early life, and had been pleased at the frankness of his answers, which she now knew for a skilful tissue of lies. If he had but told her, and if she had accepted the fact, not realizing all it involved, then—when disillusion came, she would have lived it down stoically and in silence. But now—now—the craving of the night watches mastered her afresh; the craving to get away from him at all costs; never to see him or speak to him again.

She dressed hurriedly, noiselessly, lest he wake before she could escape. Once only she hesitated and flushed painfully, her eyes upon a leather jewel-case he had given her. Then she opened it, unbuttoned the bodice of her habit, and slipped into it a handful of crisp bank-notes, the half-yearly interest on a small legacy, the only one Dick Vereker had achieved;—to his wife's open indignation.

Twenty minutes later, she was cantering down the Mall, between rows of yellowing trees, wide strips of grass; and incidental flower beds aglow with asters and chrysanthemums. A nip of frost was in the air, and its clear crisp chill brought transient touches of carmine to her cheeks. A light wind from the hills set the *sirus* pods rattling; and whirled showers of brown and yellow leaves back to the earth whence they had sprung. All things, even the most commonplace, were touched with a nameless magic, more readily felt than defined. A bullock cart, creaking and lumbering towards her through the blue haze, seemed a thing of mystery flecked with the fairy gold of sunrise.

Lyndsay was young; and for all her heaviness of heart the strong wine of morning put new life into her veins. Once on the race-course, she gave "Pegasus" his head and sitting well back in the saddle surrendered herself to the ecstasy of motion. Riding lessons for Lyndsay

had been one of Vereker's unwarrantable extravagances. The girl had the steady nerve, the firm light hand on the reins that mark the true horsewoman; and now and again in holiday outings on Dartmoor, they had flung economy to the winds and spent long hours in the saddle.

She pulled up at last, reluctantly, and stooping, patted the moist shoulder of her country-bred, whose proud carriage of neck and tail proclaimed his Arab strain, and whose companionship had been the one unadulterated joy that India had given her as yet. And again, as exhilaration subsided, the relentless question sprang at her—what next? A tame return to the detested bungalow—to Carrie and Monty and the ubiquitous black folk, from whom she shrank the more now that she knew their blood ran in her husband's veins? And just because he was one of them that shrinking would have to be crushed and stifled—If? Had it come to that? Did she seriously contemplate the possibility of flight, the repudiation of vows made before God and Man? The notes hidden in her breast gave answer, tempting her beyond endurance; and the imperative longing to escape was like a flash-light turned upon her ruined House of Life; her murdered love. Reproach herself as she might, the fact remained. It would be so simple, such a divine relief, to canter to the station, take a ticket for Pindi, and from there to write, what she knew she would never bring herself to say,—that although she might forgive him, she could not go back to him as his wife.

And then?

To look too far ahead is to cripple action. She would not look. She would shut her eyes and go forward. Time enough, when the irrevocable step was taken, to reconstruct her life out of the pieces that remained. She recognised here a touch of her father's uncalculating recklessness; and at thought of him her heart contracted afresh. If only he had lived, this fatal marriage would have been a thing unthinkable!

She breathed deeply, thrust aside the deterrent thoughts that besieged her, and turning the pony's head, discovered, to her dismay, that she was no longer alone.

A man on a mouse-coloured Waler was trotting soundlessly towards her over the soft earth; and at a glance she

recognised the nameless partner who had unconsciously precipitated events; who, it seemed, was now to have a further hand in the shaping of her destiny. For to Lyndsay this solitary interloper stood for the small world of Peshawur, to which she had not given a thought; the world that would gape and chatter, and speculate; that would pity her, and condemn her husband, whose thin-skinned sensitiveness to its opinion she had yet to recognise as an attribute of his kind.

This view of the case roused all the best in her;—the loyalty, unselfishness and courage that so continually put to shame the cynic's complacent scorn of poor humanity; the woman's eternal instinct for martyrdom, from which even the Suffragette is not exempt! Could she, in spite of all, deliberately deal him this double blow—?

But by now the time for indecision was past. Before she could complete the question Laurence had touched his white helmet; and her answering greeting gave no hint that he had stepped into a tragedy and changed its course.

"I was wondering if you were going to recognise me!" was all she said.

"I did that long ago," he answered simply. "And—I was amazed. I never thought you'd get out of the house to-day. I was coming to enquire."

The warmth in her cheeks deepened visibly.

"Now you will think I made an unwarrantable fuss over nothing; which is not true! It did hurt—at the time; and I didn't dare risk more dancing. Riding's another matter. But you may come and enquire all the same. There might be developments, later!"

Her deliberate lightness rang true; and if Laurence had been amazed at sight of her, amazement deepened to admiration as he listened.

"May I really come? This afternoon?" he asked, marvelling at his good fortune.

"Yes. This afternoon," she answered—burning her boats.

"How good of you! I was half afraid that—after the exaggerated stuff I talked last night, you might prefer to drop my acquaintance. And I wanted to apologise—to explain—"

"Please don't do anything so superfluous," she pro-

tested, a hint of authority in her quiet tone. "You spoke —the truth. Why should you deny, or—distort it, on my account? Only, remember, you have no right to sit in judgment;—neither have I. And it seems to me that is all we need say on the subject."

She did not turn away her head in speaking. Her eyes looked steadily into his own; and he discovered that their colour, which had puzzled him by lamplight, was neither grey nor violet, but that exquisite blending of both that the sky takes on in summer, between sunset and dark. He discovered also, with a throb of quite unjustifiable exultation, that in the mysterious blue depths of those eyes lived a spirit of honesty and courage very rare in women. She had met the blow four-square; and none but he would suspect that there had been any blow to meet. With the utmost gentleness and tact she had set even him at arms' length; while her ready acceptance of his overtures to friendship—had automatically readjusted an awkward situation. The whole thing was superb.

"I understand," he said gravely; and his tone had in it more than formal acquiescence. "Are you going home at once? Or will you canter round with me first?"

"I should love to," she answered; and they rode; Laurence purposely holding his pony in, the better to satisfy the desire of his eyes. They circled the course twice; once at a hand gallop, once at a leisurely canter; and when they drew rein, the face she turned on him was glowing and radiant.

"That was glorious," she said fervently. "And now I really *must* go back."

"But I may see you to the gate?" he pleaded.

"Yes—do." Then she glanced up at him, frank amusement in her eyes. "I'm wondering if you realize that even now I haven't a ghost of a notion who you are!"

He threw up his head and laughed. "What a savage you must think me! But—somehow we seemed to know one another quite well. My name's Laurence—Alan Laurence, R. E., very much at your service!"

"Laurence?" To his infatuated ears, her voice seemed to caress the word. "Surely that is a name to conjure with out here? A name to be proud of."

"Yes. But I can claim no connection with that remarkable family. I'm Laurence, with a 'u'; and I'm afraid there's precious little of the man of mark about me."

"When I know you better I shall find out whether that's modesty or the simple truth!"

"It's the simple truth. You can take my word for it."

"I prefer to judge for myself!" she answered, smiling, and he glowed. Fate, having stabbed him, seemed disposed to provide balm for the wound.

Outside the gateposts they halted. The moment of respite was over; and again the dread of meeting her husband crushed the courage out of Lyndsay's heart.

As they drew up, she had sighted a familiar figure in the verandah; Monty, in a scarlet flannel dressing-gown, squatting on the stones, soiling his young soul with unsavoury items of bazaar gossip, retailed by the ayah and the sais, who squatted likewise, chewing and spitting without reserve;—sure sign that this particular *chota sahib* was of no account in their esteem. A ginger-coloured pariah, lame and mangy, crouched close to the boy, and pursued fleas with the bored indifference of his kind.

The arrival of the riders dispersed the small conclave. Monty, springing to his feet, darted through the *chick*, like a rabbit into a burrow, followed by the dog who haunted him as his shadow; and Lyndsay flushed painfully as she held out her hand.

"Thank you so much for coming. Good-bye."

"Till this afternoon," he said, frankly exultant. "Be careful about dismounting, please. I wish I could get you down."

"I shall manage all right," she assured him sweetly; and he rode off without glancing towards the house, which Lyndsay entered with a heart that seemed to flutter in her throat, and with no more idea than when she set out of what she intended to say to her husband. The weakness of her ankle irritated her. Dignity and a limping gait are incompatible. One of Jim's sticks, picked up in the verandah, mended matters a little, and hearing Carrie's voice in the dining-room, haranguing Monty as he fled through, she went forward desperately, prepared for the worst.

But ill we anticipate generally eludes us, in order, later on, to catch us unawares. No Jim in the dining-room; only Carrie Vansittart drinking coffee at a table littered with dirty plates, toast crusts, half empty dishes —all the uninviting remnants of a finished meal. And Carrie herself, unbrushed and unwashed, was eminently in keeping with the picture. Her morning gown,—a venerable maroon-coloured garment mottled with mementos of byegone breakfasts—culminated at the neck and wrists in greasy plush trimmings and coffee-coloured lace that cried aloud for the wash-tub. A plait of thick oily hair was twisted up anyhow, in the nape of her neck, and a row of curling pins rigidly outlined her forehead.

To Lyndsay, fresh from the wholesome sweetness of Nature's morning face, the scene struck a nightmare note of prophecy, producing physical nausea; a dread that, in an impulse of loyalty, she had undertaken a task beyond her strength. For one small mercy at least she was grateful . . . that from the first she had avoided the perfunctory peck of morning and evening greeting, which the situation demanded, and which Carrie had waited for—in vain.

"Where's Jim?" she asked in a toneless voice.

Carrie greeted the question with strident laughter.

"Oo yes . . . that is *oll* veree fine," she broke out, in the strong accent that so grated on Lyndsay's nerves. "A mightee lot *you* care! Dragging him away from the dance last night, with your storee of a broken ankle. He even made me lose some of my dances, with ardent admirers, because thee pain might be keeping you awake. And after oll, he found you sleeping like a log! *I* gave him my mind prettee freelee, I can tell you! And this morning, in spite of thee ankle, . . . look . . . you are off at dawn, like a green parrot, to meet that swagger 'bow-wow' you have picked up all of a sudden. . . ."

Lyndsay, who had not attempted to check this torrent of inaccuracies, merely sank into her chair, and let the waters flow over her head. But on the last words, a crease of perplexity showed between her brows. The slangy vulgarism of the country was new to her.

"I have—picked up—what?" she demanded slowly, anger smouldering in her tone.

But when Carrie waxed generous in the bestowal of her mind upon others, she was not readily daunted by their reception of the gift.

"My gracious! How innocent we are!" she cried, ponderously sarcastic. "Of course I mean the big Sapper you were dancing with last night. Montee saw him with you at the gate just now. But I warn you, if you encourage him to hang about the house, *I* shall expect to have *my* innings also. It is really scandalous the way you married women snap up *all* the men!"

At that Lyndsay's anger smouldered no longer. It flamed in her cheeks and eyes. But her natural dignity shrank from open quarrel with this woman whose vituperative eloquence, heard afar off when back-verandah battles were in progress, had never as yet been directed against herself.

"You are talking sheer nonsense," she said coldly. "And if I chose to ride with a man every morning of my life, it would be no one's concern but my own,—and Jim's."

"Huh! Jim is a *pukka* fool, as I told him last night."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself," Lyndsay flashed out in spite of good resolves—"seeing how much you and your son owe to his particular form of foolishness."

She spoke in ignorance of the Eastern point of view; and her formidable sister-in-law rounded on her with a palpable ruffling of feathers. "Foolishness, indeed! That is a prettee storee. Jim knows well enough that it is simply his dutee to keep a roof over us, till I find another man who is readee to do so, which I *could* do to-morrow if I *chose*." A self-conscious giggle underlined the ludicrous discord between her appearance and her words, and went near to upsetting Lyndsay's gravity. "It has *always* been that way with me, ever since I let down my skirts; though *I* never made sheep's eyes, or flattered the men's vanitees, like *some* women I know! But for oll that I do not intend to hurree myself, or make a bad bargain to please anee one; and I can tell you, Linsee, that even if Jim is the biggest fool in Asia, he will do his dutee by me and my beautiful boy, whether your ladyship likes it or not!"

But Lyndsay having swallowed a half-cold cup of coffee

and a few mouthfuls of toast, pushed back her chair, and rose with a sigh. "I'm sorry I can't wait till you've done," she said with formal politeness. "But my head's bad and I'm tired. After my bath, I shall lie down most of the morning; and I would rather not be disturbed."

"Oo, veree well. As you please. But you are *not* a cheerful companion, I must say. I thot you would like to hear oll thee '*khubber*'* about last night. And, by thee way, Jim left a lot of orders about wet bandages and keeping your foot up. But I have clean forgotten them all."

"It doesn't matter in the least," Lyndsay answered apathetically, as she passed through the curtain into the blessed sanctuary of her own room. The cautious closing of one of its many doors,—few Indian rooms have less than four,—told her that Monty and his familiar spirit had just passed that way; and tears of helpless irritation pricked her eyes. Her very bedroom was not sacred from the investigations of that indiscriminate sinner, who in his mother's eyes could do no wrong. His passion for prowling enraged her. Already she had missed one or two odds and ends, and guessed shrewdly which way they had gone. Once she had actually found him amusing himself in the back verandah with a pocket-book full of her dead father's letters which, having been left on her bureau by accident, had promptly disappeared. On this occasion,—remembered with shame,—she had lost her temper and soundly boxed his ears; and there had been exhibitions of injured motherhood for hours afterwards.

But now, with the weight of the days to be lying heavy on her heart, she was thankful not to have caught him in open iniquity, and with movements pathetically listless, she limped from door to door, locking herself in. Then, exchanging her habit for a dressing-gown, she flung herself upon the bed, and let pent-up grief have its outlet in a passion of silent tears.

And, as if set apart from the tempest of emotion, her brain visualized, with cruel clearness, all that her decision involved. If Jim alone had to be reckoned with, the future might look less black. But the intrusion of

* News

Carrie and Monty brought a sordid element into her tragedy; an element of vulgar, underhand spite, not fully realized till to-day.

For to-day Carrie had blossomed forth, flamboyant, in her true colours. These had been temporarily toned down by an unusual display of firmness from Jim, who had privately made it clear to her that, jealousy or no jealousy, his bride was a person to be treated with consideration and respect. To his own surprise, he had been obeyed, after a fashion; a marvel mainly due to the bride herself, and to the fact that Carrie Vansittart had never yet come into close contact with that flower of many rare qualities—a high-bred Englishwoman. Lyndsay's gentle aloofness and reserve, the air of unconscious refinement that was about her like an emanation—a refinement of heart and spirit manifested in the flesh—had, for a week or two, puzzled and overawed this woman of the ungoverned heart and tongue. But after a while there had been lapses; fits of sulkiness; flashes of jealous spite; till this morning, rage at the loss of dances with 'ardent admirers,' and at Jim's imperviousness to her lamentations when Lyndsay was at stake, added fuel to the fire that had burnt in her since his marriage; this morning, 'best behaviour' and veiled antagonisms had been flung aside, revealing the woman beneath in all her flagrant unloveliness of thought and speech. And Lyndsay, reviewing the scene with a mental shudder of disgust, already foreknew the truth that it is not the great griefs, but the small, daily dyings, the incessant pin-pricks on one tender spot, that break the heart and sap the courage even of the stoutest.

If only Jim—whose love for her, however selfish, was a reality—could be induced to see her point of view in regard to the fatal effects of this mixed household on their small chance of happiness.—But sudden memory of the ordeal ahead tripped up her thought. Jim had yet to be confronted with his own shortcomings. In what spirit would he take her discovery? And how should she account for it without implicating Laurence?

At this point weariness blurred her brain, and she fell into a troubled sleep.

She was roused two hours later by a persistent knock-

ing, and a voice, that was not Carrie's saying: "Mrs. Videlle, mayn't I come in?" Springing out of bed, she wrestled with the heavy bolt, and flung open the door. Of all people in the world, Mrs. Rivers was the most welcome just then.

She entered, immaculate and imposing, in grey calling gown and wide black hat; a disconcerting contrast to the small figure in blue, whose hot cheeks and rumpled hair told their own story.

"Very pushing of me! But I thought you wouldn't turn me away," she said in the deep resonant voice that sorted so well with her proportions, "I've been wanting to get to you since breakfast. I saw you dancing with that nice new Laurence boy. Then I heard you had hurt your foot and gone home, and I was haunted all night by a fear that it wasn't—only the foot."

Lyndsay set her lips, and the ready colour dyed her cheek.

"You'd rather not speak of it?" Mrs. Rivers asked gently.

"Speak of what?" For a moment she faced the other steadily. Then a pitiful tremour of the lower lip betrayed her, and by a natural impulse of motherhood, the elder woman gathered her into the large enfolding shelter of her arms.

In the midst of her astonishment and relief, Lyndsay remembered a saying of Gwen's, "You've only to be hugged once by Mum to know she was meant to be the mother of twenty!" She had achieved six and adopted others, with a large-hearted liberality that occasionally roused her only daughter to rebellion.

"My dear,—my dear," the deep voice murmured soothingly. "There is no need to speak. I know. We all know. And you have only just found out? Is that it?"

"Yes."

The word was a stifled whisper, and she did not lift her head.

"And—you have seen him since? Your husband?"

"No. I went out early. When I got back he was gone; and I don't know what to say to him when he comes in."

Mrs. Rivers hesitated a moment, then: "May I ask an intrusive question?" she said under her breath.

"Y-yes."

"You can still—care for him?"

"I—I wish I could," murmured truthful Lyndsay; and her small shiver was worse than tears. "I mean—Oh, I can't explain!"

"Of course not, dear child," Mrs. Rivers said gently. "But I think, in your place, I should say—just nothing at all."

Lyndsay's gaze widened, and the other made haste to add: "I know that sounds like putting all the punishment on your shoulders. But it's you I'm considering dear, first and last. Even if he should ever guess that you know, your silence will lift you in his eyes, and might possibly shame him into an avowal of some sort, which would be better all round for you both. Of course, I speak without full knowledge of events; but does my advice seem worth taking?"

"Yes.—Yes." Lyndsay answered low and fervently. "It would be a great relief not to speak. But oh—" she pressed both hands against her eyeballs—"I hope he won't come home to lunch."

"Well, we needn't risk it," Mrs. Rivers decided briskly. "Get your best frock on, and come back to *tiffin* with me. Leave a note for him, saying I begged you to come with us to the Cavalry polo match. That will give you breathing space to find your bearings before you see him again. Will you come?"

Lyndsay's lips quivered a little. "I would like to immensely. But oh,—why are you so good to me?"

"Because I love you, Lyndsay my dear. I can't call you anything else after this morning! Be quick and dress now. I'm going to do your hair for you and make you look as charming as you know how."

This time Lyndsay—the reticent, the undemonstrative—fairly flung her arms round the speaker, in an impulsive caress, such as she had not bestowed on any living being since the day Dick Vereker went out on his last round.

"Oh, but what *will* Carrie say?" she cried, with a laugh that broke in the middle. "I've had one piece of her mind to-day, and I don't want any more of it."

"Carrie be hanged!" said the Commissioner's wife shamelessly in defiance of her irreproachable hat and gown. "And I wouldn't at all mind officiating for the occasion! But we mustn't waste time in chattering. I'm in a hurry to get you home, and to introduce Gwen formally to her new sister."

## CHAPTER VIII.

Alas, that neither bonds, nor vows,
Can certify possession.
—EMERSON.

AT half-past twelve James Videlle entered the drawing-room hurriedly, as if in search of something. Finding it empty he went on into the bedroom, walking with head and shoulders thrust slightly forward; sure sign of instability, physical and moral. Emptiness here also, and a rumpled bed, suggesting restlessness of mind, or body. Remained only Carrie's room. "And she's not likely to be *there*," he reflected with a frown of bewildered irritation. "Why the deuce didn't she obey my orders, and lie up? Carrie may know."

He found that lady completing her toilet, in a purple petticoat and dressing-jacket; her mouth full of hair-pins, both hands wrestling with her thick coil of hair; for she held it a mark of gentility not to be "dressed" before twelve.

"What's become of Lyn?" Videlle demanded sharply, "Didn't you give her my message?"

"Message indeed!" retorted Carrie, releasing a shower of hair-pins, and tossing an injured head. "A precious lot *she* cares about your messages! She was plentee well enough to keep her riding engagement with that Engineer fellow. Then she comes back pretending she's tired; snaps out at me when I try to be pleasant; eats no breakfast and locks herself into her room. A headache *this* time, if you please. *Veree* convenient! But she let in Mrs. Rivers fast enough; and of course she was not too tired to go gadding off to tiffin with a *burra Mem** in her best frock—"

"But her ankle—!"

"Oo, yes! She limped a bit certainlee. Nothing to

* Great lady.

speak of. It was just a fine fuss about nothing. Upsetting *oll* my fun too! H'n! I've no patience with her nonsense!" And she reverted wrathfully to her interrupted toilet.

But Videlle's frown deepened. For all her reticence and gentle aloofness, he knew enough of his Lyndsay to be aware that sham headaches and fusses about nothing were not 'in her line'; and, like Mrs. Rivers, he shrewdly suspected "more behind."

"You say she ate no breakfast?" he persisted anxiously. "Did she look white—fagged?"

"My gracious, Jim! You *are* a soft!" snapped his devoted sister, adjusting a hairpin with nice precision. "There is *nothing* wrong with her, I tell you, except what you men call 'swelled head,' because Mrs. Commissioner has taken her up. Alreadee, *I* am not good enough for her, and veree soon *you* will not be good enough either. *Now* you see the follee of marrying a stuck-up English girl, instead of one born in the countree, who would never have thot herself too fine for your relations, and would at least have been a cheeree companion for me."

Videlle did not answer at once. He stood for a full minute watching Carrie's clumsy manipulations, his surface brain wondering idly why some women looked so unlovely in *deshabille*, and others so supremely alluring. But below the surface, the man's contradictory spirit—that wavered always between humility and the self importance which goes with lack of humour—was combating a doubt that had tormented him of late: a doubt revived by Carrie's taunt; though her view of it did not by any means square with his own.

"Yes, it was folly, I suppose," he said at last, as if answering his own thoughts rather than another's words. "It's done now, though; and I wouldn't lose her for a kingdom. I was crazy enough to hope we might bridge things over. But she's another '*jāt*' * from us altogether," he added bitterly. "And she's clever enough to see it. She'll probably end in hating me; and, after all, perhaps it wasn't quite fair to drag her into this sort of thing with her eyes shut."

But by this time Carrie had recovered her breath with a gasp.

* Class.

"My Lord, Jim, what in the dickens *has* come to you?" she cried, agitation, as usual, inducing incoherences. "Are you going out of your head, to talk such stuff? Not fair! My word, you are even a bigger '*pāgel*' than I thot you. She ot to be *proud* to be thee wife of a handsome fellow like you; and if you have *one* grain of sense left, you ot to show her plainlee that you won't put up with her airs and graces,—neglecting us for her swagger friends. A little *zubbardust** from you would *soon* change her tune! But if you keep on with this fooleree of putting your neck down for her to tread upon, you can take my word, that it will end in her walking *right over you,* into another man's arms!"

Her staccato utterance gave to her excited rush of speech the effect of pistol shots fired in such quick succession that no interruption was possible. But at the last statement Videlle made a hasty movement as though he would strike her.

"Damn you! Hold your tongue!" he shouted furiously. "Lyndsay's as pure-hearted as a child; and if you start throwing that sort of mud at her, I swear I'll send you packing—you and your precious kid!"

For a half a minute Carrie was awed. Such outbursts of violence were not uncommon with Videlle; but never, as yet, had he openly defied this woman, whose aggressive individuality might well have overpowered a stronger man. The novelty of the sensation startled her:—for half a minute. But she had other weapons in her armoury than explosive speech; and now, to Videlle's dismay, she burst into tears. Unrestrained sobs set her exuberant person quivering like an agitated jelly. She wept loud and shamelessly, without attempting to hide her face. And Videlle was a sensitive man! She informed him, between the paroxysms, that people did not *need* to tell her she was a fly in the honey-pot, and a millstone on the hearth; that ever since his marriage he had cared no more for her than for a pelican on the house-top; and that since he was *so anxious* to get rid of her, she would accept the very first man who offered, even if he were of the lowest caste imaginable! Nay more, she would even go at *once;* and would tell all her friends and relations

*Show of authority.

that she had been *turned out*, for trying to save him from the selfishness and tyranny of his English wife! Till Videlle, for very shame, must needs eat his own words, and comfort her as best he might.

"My good woman, for Heaven's sake stop that row," he besought her desperately. "Just because I lost my temper for a minute. You're talking nonsense by the yard. But I won't be dictated to about Lyndsay; and I won't hear a word against her from you or anyone. She is the sweetest woman alive, and the last person who would wish me to behave shabbily to you and your boy."

At that the sobs gave place to spasmodic chokings and sniffings of resigned martyrdom.

"Veree well, I will remain, if you *prefer* it," she conceded between the sniffs. "I onlee wished to snatch you from the jaws of your own follee, and you treat me like a deaf adder in your bosom!"—Carrie believed similes to be the hall-mark of culture.—"But it's luckee for you that I'm forgiving by nature, and readee, for your sake, to put up with slights and discomforts that are veree upsetting to a sensitive disposition. For I am convinced *evereething* would go to rack and ruin without me. Besides, when a man goes '*pāgel*' * over a woman, as you have done over Linsee, he ot to have somebodee near to look after *his* interests—"

"Very noble of you, old girl," Videlle remarked drily, "though I'm not quite so blind to my own interests as you seem to imagine."

His anger had evaporated; but his manhood chafed at this tyranny in the guise of devotion, which he was at once too weak, and too innately a Hindu, to overrule.

"H'n—I am glad to hear that!" Carrie rejoined with sceptical fervour. "But oll thee same," her voice took a new note of pathos, "you won't go back on your lone lorn sister, will you Jimmee,—not even for the sake of your prettee wife?"

"Of course not, you haivering woman. I've said so once. What more d'you want?"

He had gleaned a few Scots words and phrases from his father; and found a vague satisfaction in using them when the Asiatic in him was more dominant than usual.

*Mad.

"Oo, by thee way," Carrie called after him as he went—"Linsee left a note for you. In the *dufter*, I think."

"Confound it all! You might have told me that sooner—" And slamming the door behind him Videlle hurried into his study.

There lay the envelope; and he seized it greedily. But his hands, that were not quite steady, hesitated in the act of breaking the seal. For the past few weeks he had gone in mortal fear of her discovery, and its possible results. Her shrinking dread of the servants had not escaped his notice; and his leisure hours had been peopled with distracting speculations as to what she would do if she *did* find out. Perhaps he held the answer in his hands.

Fool, to torment himself gratuitously! He tore open the envelope, and drew a breath of relief. Lyndsay's note was short and unsatisfactory; but it did not contain the repudiation of her vows that he half expected if the truth came out.

"Dear Jim," she wrote. "In case you come home this is just to let you know that Mrs. Rivers called and begged me to go back and lunch with her. We are going on to the polo; and I can meet you afterwards at the Club. My ankle is better; but I am not using it more than I can help.

"Lyndsay."

His gaze reverted to the first two words—"Dear Jim!" he reflected bitterly. "We seem to be going backwards instead of forwards. Does she really believe women write like that to the men they love? What's wrong with me, after all, that my devotion should leave her so cold?"

He glanced approvingly at his own reflection in a panel mirror hanging near the fire-place. A creditable figure enough in its workmanlike khaki uniform; the chest a shade too narrow; the legs, swathed in puttees, a shade too lean: a certain lack of breadth and stability marring the whole. Not that Videlle acknowledged these defects, even if he saw them. He merely cursed his luck,—the scapegoat of the ineffectual,—and tearing Lyndsay's note into shreds, flung it into the fire. From a private cupboard he helped himself to a "peg," too

stiff for a midday nip,—his Scotch father did him an ill turn here; lit a cigar and flung himself into his chair.

Not until that moment of reprieve did he realize how acute his anxiety had been since Laurence gave him her message in the card-room. But reprieve could only be temporary. Lyndsay was, as he had said, too discerning, not to make comparisons and draw conclusions that could lead to one event only. He recognised in Carrie's stronger "touch of the tar-brush," in the slipperiness and slovenly ways of herself and her son, a standing menace to the marriage he had achieved, as it were, at the point of the bayonet. But the Hindu strain in his blood accepted her right to live under his roof as a matter of course. It was "*dastur*"*; and there was no more to be said.

His only real chance lay in leaving India for good; that he recognised.

Long before Lyndsay's day, his futile, incurable hatred of the black drop in his blood had urged the probable wisdom of flight. Twice, while on furlough, he had considered the advisability of retiring and working up a practice in England. But the chilly Northern atmosphere of her skies and people repelled him; and he had reckoned without the tenacious charm of India, the mysterious, woman-country—woman-ruled, for all the seeming contradiction of her zenanas. Her grip was upon his heart-strings; her blood in his veins. His short spell of education "at Home" had not availed to snap the chain by which she held him; and he had long since faced the fact that there was no more hope of escape from her claim than from the clash and discord of three races at war within him;—for the Videlles were of French origin.

No; leaving India was out of the question. He must take his chance of winning this increasingly attractive wife of his in the face of obstacles that pricked his warped sensibilities like thorns under the skin;—this wife who, for seven months had been his, and yet not his. There lay the sting; the scourge that drove him too often to that fatal private cupboard, and quickened the ready irritability of the weak man, conscious of battling with unequal odds. True, nothing could rob him of her loyalty; her wifely allegiance. But each month brought

* Custom.

clearer proof that he was still little closer to the real Lyndsay than he had been on the day of his marriage.

And it was the real Lyndsay he wanted, after all. In the first fever-heat of passion, he had believed that mere possession would suffice. But a few months of living with her had shown him his mistake; had imperceptibly purified and exalted his feeling for her, till it dawned upon him that, with love, as with everything else that matters, "the letter killeth; but the spirit giveth life." For as the test of a man is his work; so is the supreme test of a woman the quality of love that she inspires; and, all unconsciously, Lyndsay was teaching her husband the one great lesson human souls are here to learn.

He took from his breast-pocket a miniature, painted before they left home, and studied it intently, with hunger in his eyes. "Jove, what a tantalizing little woman she is!" was his ultimate thought. "But I'm *bound* to win all of her, if it takes me half my life."

He rose on the resolve; and, if he could have gone to her there and then, in the uplift of the moment, it is conceivable that he might have conquered. But it was Carrie's befrizzled head that appeared in the doorway, summoning him to lunch; and he followed her sullenly,—the evil genius of his home.

Thus, by the minor cruelties of anti-climax, does life have us in derision.

## CHAPTER IX.

Too late to say farewell.
Can aught remain hereafter, as of old?
A touch, a tone, have changed the heaven and earth
Something of me is thine, of thee is mine.
Too late to say farewell.

—William Watson.

As for Lyndsay, she blessed Mrs. Rivers from her heart, while rating herself soundly for the immensity of her relief; for the refreshing sense of home that welcomed her as she crossed the wide, cool hall of the Commissioner's house. Mrs. Rivers insisted on keeping an arm round her; and in this fashion they passed between two heavily embroidered curtains into a drawing-room thirty feet long and high in proportion; a room compact of rich colour-harmonies, gleams of brass and copper, rare china and a few well-chosen pictures; the whole pervaded with the faint, clean scent of roses, freshly cut and filling every available bowl, even the sacred Satzuma, that only Gwen dared put to such frivolous uses. And because the woman who loves her home infuses into it some suggestion of her inner self, Lyndsay found, in this house, so antipodal to her own, the same atmosphere of dignity and friendly spaciousness that dwelt in the mind and heart of Monica Rivers herself.

In the drawing-room they found Gwen—a long-limbed creature of her father's type, whose straightness and suppleness lent her an almost boyish grace; an effect heightened by breadth of shoulder and short dark curls that parted naturally on one side, and in Finlay's eyes completed her charm. For charm there was, in spite of a large mouth and features triumphantly irregular; the charm exhaled by a glad spirit, too much in love with life and all things living to be conscious of itself or hypercritical of others.

She was busy entertaining two men; and as the three

rose at the parting of the curtains, Lyndsay found herself smiling into the eyes of her new-found friend of the morning.

"I've asked them both to tiffin, Mother." It was Gwen who spoke. "I hope you don't mind!"

"It's possible I may survive it!" Mrs. Rivers answered, laughing. "And I've brought Lyndsay back to take her on to the polo."

A light stress on the name set Gwen's eyes twinkling. Then with a large-hearted impulse, worthy of her mother, she swept forward and, taking Lyndsay by the shoulders, kissed her on both cheeks.

"Of course that means she's adopted you, and I'm just delighted," she said heartily. "It's a mercy when I am; for she never by any chance has the grace to consult me in advance! This is Captain Finlay, her Personal Assistant—also one of the family!—" indicating him with a superb sweep of her arm. "And you appear to know Mr. Laurence—as yet unattached!"

"Yes. I know Mr. Laurence," Lyndsay answered, smiling demurely with a proffered hand; and as the other three slipped into intimate talk and laughter they had a moment of isolation, which Laurence was not the man to lose.

"What about this afternoon?" he asked, his lowered tone enhancing the note of intimacy that had marked their intercourse from the first; and that seemed to both, if they thought of it at all, the most natural thing in the world.

"Well—you're here!" she answered lightly, evading the issue. "And you're going to stay."

"But—supposing I hadn't been here?"

"I should have asked Mrs. Rivers to send a note."

"That would have been very disappointing."

"Yes. I should have been sorry."

There was finality in the tone; a hint of "thus far and no farther" which he was quick to recognise; and he said no more.

Mr. Rivers came in late for lunch, with his Personal Assistant, Frank Everett, dapper and self-assured; a rising civilian, of the modern school, that does its work efficiently and keeps as much detached from it as possible;

a man marked for success, official and social; yet none the less a somewhat inadequate human being. His determination to do the "cute thing" for himself by marrying the Commissioner's daughter was an open secret, freely discussed by those who thrive on crumbs from other folk's tables, though unspoken of in the Rivers household;—as is the way of private affairs on this our planet.

Everett's smothered irritation at finding Finlay in the seat he chose to regard as his own, brought a smile of satisfaction to the Commissioner's thin lips, where lurked a spirit of dry humour, that kept the world beautiful for him in defiance of serious heart trouble and the anxiety of a Frontier post, at a time when Russian restlessness on the Pamirs seemed to those who knew most, the precursor of "the inevitable war." For this was a man whom not even the Anglicizing of India—with its deplorable intrusion of native officialdom between ruler and ruled—could detach from the work that was his life; a man who still believed in the sympathy and personal influence that won and held the Punjab, when mere efficiency would have been broken on the wheel; who knew, from long and hard experience that, though India may be governed from Simla, the Man in the Plains is the pivot and fulcrum of our rule.

Thus, outside the office these two had little in common; and although Rivers could appreciate the tact and quick intelligence which made the younger man a skilful, if unsympathetic Assistant—he had "no use for him" as a son-in-law; hoped shamelessly that his Gwen was just amusing herself without afterthought; getting in her hand, so to speak, for the man who should be worthy of her, if any such existed;—which an infatuated father is not apt to believe.

"I've had news this morning, child, that will amuse you more than it does me," he said, as he drew in his chair. "A rambling M. P. with a fatal gift of the pen, proposes to honour us with a visit next month. He sends a letter of introduction from old Smyth, whom I shall reason with next mail on the use and abuse of friendship."

Gwen's eyes sparkled. "A globe-trotter? What fun! Don't you bother, Dad. I'll take charge of him, body and bones!"

"So you should, my dear, and welcome, if he were anything so commonplace. But the fellow's a Reformer!" he took out two closely written sheets and consulted them. "Garstin's the name, and judging from this letter—which doesn't possess the saving grace of humour—he seems to have taken out a patent for solving Imperial problems while you wait! He only needs six months run out here to put the gilded roof on his arm-chair theories and ideals, before settling down in earnest to the Great Work . . ." he glanced again at the letter. " 'Our Frontier Administration: A Comprehensive Criticism of its Methods and Aims'! Nothing like a good mouth-filling title to convince the guileless British Public that you know all about it."

"Oh, but that's heavenlier still!" cried wicked Gwen. "Do *please* let me have him! I'll collect all Mr. O'Gorman's wildest fictions-founded-on-fact, and offer them as material for The Book. And I'm sure you can trust Mr. Everett to explode Theories and Ideals. They sound like bombs! And I daresay they're nearly as dangerous! Truly, Dad, we could manage him beautifully—Mr. Everett and I."

But Rivers smiled and shook his head.

"I'm afraid roasting a guest alive is against the laws of hospitality, girlie," he said, and retired into the shell that was his normal abode. Gwen's "Mr. Everett and I" sounded unpleasantly in his ears. He did not care to couple them even in thought; a fact that his wife's insight—sharpened by secret anxiety, and years of living with an inarticulate man—promptly detected and approved.

Yet later in the afternoon, when the girl announced her wish to ride down to the polo with Mr. Everett instead of driving, Mrs. Rivers consented without demur. Having laid the foundations of her child's character in those early years that hold the future in solution, she could afford to allow her a freer hand than those mothers who wake up to their responsibilities just ten years too late.

Finlay was standing beside her at the moment of Gwen's request and she turned to him swiftly enough to catch the shadow in his eyes. She had long since grasped the significance of his devotion to herself, and regretted its

futility; but the best type of modern parent is chary of needless intrusion into a temple built for two.

"Since Gwen has set the example," she said cheerily, "I authorize a 'general post'! It's waste of good material letting you two men drive down together. You come with me in the victoria, and let your nice friend drive Mrs. Videlle in the cart. He won't mind, will he?"

"Don't much look as if he would," Finlay remarked drily, with a glance at the two who seemed absorbed in their subject or each other. Then his gaze reverted to Gwen's vanishing figure.

"Is that really coming off?" he asked as the curtains fell behind her.

"Why? Are people already discussing cheap and effective wedding presents?"

Finlay winced. "There or thereabouts. May I discourage them?

"Certainly. On principle!"

"Not on the strength of facts?"

Question and tone seemed to plead for fuller confidence; and this woman of the bravely smiling face was too intimate with the ache of suspense not to respond. "My dear man, I know no more of the facts than you do," she said kindly. "I believe in respecting the reserve of the young; and in some things, my outspoken lass is almost as 'inward' as her own father. What's more, she's got his head on her shoulders; and has been reared not to look upon marriage as an end in itself, but simply as a condition to be accepted for the sake of the one man she could not endure to lose. If she is going to feel that way about Frank Everett,—well—one must put up with it. But at least I have safeguarded her to the best of my power; and she knows she is supremely needed at home. I couldn't bear that any girl of mine should be driven to accept a man as a means to an end. It is bad enough seeing other people's daughters—" She broke off abruptly; but Finlay, anxious on Alan's account, was quick to catch the drift of her thought.

"You mean—little Mrs. Videlle?" he asked under his breath.

But she gave him one of her direct looks. "I mean—other people's daughters, all and sundry!" she answered,

smiling. "Poor darlings! If only I could mother them all! I don't suffer from modesty, you see! And it's high time I put my things on."

Then he knew that she had Lyndsay's confidence, and would permit no word on the subject. That was the kind of woman she was.

Laurence received his orders with smothered elation; and as they drove off a downward glance at Lyndsay sitting demurely by his elbow, thrilled him with an ecstatic sense of possession not to be quenched by disconcerting facts.

"I'm in rare luck all round to-day," he said, speaking his thought, with the boyish candour that was his. "It was stunning of Mrs. Rivers to bring you along."

Lyndsay received this tribute with a smile of shy amusement. She was new to India's atmosphere of freedom and friendliness between the sexes; and she found the frank appreciation of this big, blue-eyed stranger very delightful, if at moments, a little bewildering. "Mrs. Rivers is the kindest woman in the world," she answered with conviction, skilfully shifting ground.

"I can well believe it. She's the sort people at home overlook when they're busy sticking pins into Anglo-Indians." He flicked Belinda playfully in the exuberance of the moment. "Ought to be an A. I. show this afternoon. This is a great place for polo. Have you seen much since you came?"

"Three matches. It's a glorious game. The only one that makes me long to be a man!"

"A man! *That* would never do! Thank goodness you can't compass it by longing!"

This was too fervent to be ignored, and Lyndsay laughed softly.

"Really Mr. Laurence, you're the most outspoken man I ever met!"

"Hope it didn't seem like cheek," he apologized, laughing also. "The notion took me aback. But you may well call me outspoken after the way I slanged you yesterday evening."

"Yesterday evening!" Her brain echoed the words in amazement at the swift progression of this new intimacy;

at the dislocation wrought in her own theatre of thought and feeling since she had crashed into Laurence's dog-cart less than twenty-four hours ago. Verily the life of the soul is as to intensity, rather than duration. To both, this one turn of the earth on her axis had brought more of vital experience than a month of common days: —to Laurence, life's intensest moment of reality; to Lyndsay the conquest of a supreme temptation, the first act of a slow-moving tragedy whose end was shrouded in darkness.

But for a space the cloud had been dispelled by the sunlight of human sympathy and escape from an impending "scene" with Jim. For Lyndsay was one of the few women to whom silence is dearer than speech, more especially when speech involves argument, incrimination, and the bitter reproaches that spring from the white heat of suffering and poison the memory for years. In time it was conceivable that she might live down her antipathy and disgust; and till then, how much simpler and kinder to bury it out of sight.

This resolve so lightened her heart, that for the next two hours she yielded herself unreservedly to Laurence's mood of young exhilaration, to her own delight in the thud of racing hoofs, the click and rattle of a close scrimmage, the shouts of men, beside themselves with the intoxication of the finest game on earth.

And in the intervals, when—in Laurence's phrase—she deigned to become aware of his existence, she found herself laughing and talking with him, and others who hovered about the cart, as she had not done since her father died. It was strangely new and stimulating to be the centre of attraction in a little crowd of men; and her ease and spontaneity among these comparative strangers surprised her as much as it delighted Laurence, who—with the wholesome good sense of his kind—looked neither before nor after, but enjoyed his golden hour to the full.

Thus, when at dusk they drove through the Club gates in the wake of Mrs. Rivers' victoria, Lyndsay's eyes were asparkle, her cheeks aglow, with the nip of sudden cold that comes at sunset in November; and the cloud upon her spirits had retreated almost to the horizon.

But, from the verandah steps, Videlle stood watching their arrival with eyes full of smouldering fire; and at sight of him the cloud rolled swiftly up again, blotting out the blue. The instant they drew up he was down by the cart, on Lyndsay's side.

"How unconscionably late you are!" he said sharply, holding up his hands and vouchsafing Laurence a curt nod of recognition.

Then, having secured his truant wife, he was annoyed to find Finlay and Mrs. Rivers at his elbow. She had overheard his ungracious greeting and apologized sweetly, enlarging on the excellence of the match; while Finlay, quick to detect the change in Lyndsay, came to her rescue with characteristic tact.

"I hear you are a great reader, Mrs. Videlle. Do come and help me choose a book."

After an appreciable moment of hesitation, Laurence followed; and Videlle found himself obliged to escort Mrs. Rivers into the Club. Here he deserted her unceremoniously, betaking himself to the card-room, and the consolation of signing "chits" for those "little drinks" that are too often the nucleus of big tragedies.

But he lost his first rubber through sheer inattention, and his temper into the bargain. No mere game could hold him, maddened as he was by restless longing to get Lyndsay away from that "infernal Sapper"; to enforce obedience, to his wishes if nothing else. For it is your weak man who delights in a show of authority; waving it like a flag to conceal his incapacity for the real thing. Lyndsay must be made to understand that he was master; and this new departure of riding and driving with men must be nipped in the bud. Carrie's taunt of the morning, though he had flung it fiercely in her teeth, stuck like a poisoned arrow; and the pain of it bred a host of the little devilish thoughts that come to the sensitive and small-minded.

Alas, for his tender mood of the morning, his resolve by patience and devotion to win closer to the Lyndsay he could not take by force! It had evaporated, as did nine-tenths of his resolves before they could be translated into action. The sight of his wife so clearly enjoying the society of a man, in every respect his own

antithesis, had stirred up the dregs of his nature by enkindling the "pale strong flame" of jealousy:—the devil's own passion, that begets earth's most inhuman follies and sins.

He would find Lyndsay and take her home at once. Mercifully Carrie and Monty were spending the evening with folk of their own "*jat*," and they would have the house to themselves. Perhaps he had been too forbearing so far; too ready to please her at any cost. Women, like horses, needed an occasional jerk of the rein; and his haunting sense of insecurity goaded him to assert the fact of possession.

He found them still in the library, a room dedicated to shelves of shabby books and a writing-table. The Babu was absent for the moment; and Lyndsay stood near his chair, turning the leaves of a big volume in which she had been writing "suggestions" for the next consignment from Home. Laurence was at her elbow; and Finlay half sat on the table leisurely swinging a leg. The choice of a book had merged into animated talk, that ceased upon Videlle's entrance;—an additional grievance.

"I'm going home, Lyndsay," he announced brusquely. "You're ready I suppose?"

"Home?" Unconsciously her face fell. "Isn't it rather early?"

"Yes. But I want to get back. And you've done quite enough standing about. Come along."

He nodded to the men, and Lyndsay shook hands. "I won't forget the book," she said smiling up at Laurence, whose muttered thanks were inaudible.

Then they went out.

"H'm-m!" was Finlay's lucid comment as the door closed on them. "If *I* know anything of my kind, that fellow will soon take all the shine out of her afternoon's enjoyment."

But Laurence stood, lost in thought, his hands clenched upon the back of the chair. The little scene had thrust upon him, with brutal directness, the fact that his dear dream-woman—exquisite and unattainable—was the exclusive property of this sullen-faced, half-caste doctor; and the thought was like the prick of cold steel against his heart. As to himself—it was an intolerable position

for a decent-minded man; and exasperation struck a lightning flash from the cloud.

"Damnation!" he broke out desperately; and Finlay looked up from the critical beheading of a cigar.

"Quite so," said he, without mockery, "that about sums up the case. But believe me, Larry, there's devilish little to be got by kicking against the pricks, except sore heels and a gift for swearing."

And as Laurence turned away in wrath, the older man took him gently by the arm.

"Come outside a minute, old chap," he said in a changed tone. His deductions from the day's events had decided him on a final plea. "Don't imagine I mean to nag at you. It's not my line. But there's a word I feel bound to speak before it's too late. A bit of my own experience. Ugly enough, and unpleasant to rake up. But it may 'give you to think.' All I ask is that you won't start blackguarding me till I'm through."

"Not if I can help it," Alan answered, smiling ruefully. "Fire away!"

Before complying Finlay must needs get his cheroot thoroughly started; by which time they were out in the chill dark with only the stars to overhear them. Then Julian Finlay took up his tale.

"It began in the Simla greenroom;—not an original opening! I was barely thirty, and a leading light in drawing-room comedy. The inevitable 'She' (God rest her soul) was the wife of an elderly gourmet; a silky-mannered devil, with a tongue like a razor, and a coming-on dispostion towards anything in petticoats except his own wife. She was a pretty creature; clever and highly strung. But she hadn't pride or grit enough to face the world with a stiff lip, and made no attempt to hide her troubles from me. You're not to suppose I fell in love. I'm not given that way. But I've always had a weak spot in me for anything that suffers; and in those days I hadn't the knack of disguising it under ironic speech. You know enough of life by now, Larry, to guess the sequel —up to a point. We were constantly together in the theatre and elsewhere. She took the initiative, always; and, knowing she leaned on my sympathy, I hadn't the heart to hold aloof. People talked, of course; and her

husband tormented her with covert insinuations. Then one day I got a note, begging me to come to her;—and what else could a fellow do? I found her—" he hesitated. For all the years between, the pain and shame of that hour smote him afresh. "Well—she had reached the end of her tether, poor soul; and had so far misunderstood things as to believe—*I* would take her away—"

He paused again, but a stifled sound from Laurence made him hasten to add: "That's not the end though. I wish it were. Of course one had to make it clear, somehow, that such a thing was impossible—for every reason; and she managed to pull herself together. But I left her feeling like a murderer. Not that I'm fool enough to believe my ugly 'phiz' ever disturbed a woman's dreams,—or ever will. She was simply at her wits' ends; and she knew me for a kind-hearted, straight sort of chap who couldn't choose but be good to a woman. Yet—I failed her. Whether rightly or wrongly, God knows best; and three days later—she was dead. An overdose of chloral;—said to be accidental. But *I* knew the truth; and I hope to God her husband knew it too."

They had reached a broad splash of light from an open door, and involuntarily both came to a standstill.

Laurence breathed deeply.

"Good Lord, what an unholy affair!" he murmured, awed into momentary forgetfulness of its application.

Finlay nodded.

"Brands a fellow," said he. "I wouldn't have unearthed it for the benefit of any other man living."

And on this reminder Alan's pent-up wrath flashed out. "But confound it all, Finlay, where on earth does—*she* come in?" he demanded hotly, his blue eyes blazing as only blue eyes can. "And how can you presume to mention her in the same day with such a woman as that—no matter what her marriage may be? Sympathy? If you'd seen and heard her this morning, you'd know, as well as I do, that her heart might break before she'd let a man offer her sympathy. And as for the other thing—Faugh! It's inconceivable! But that's always the way with you cool-headed, satirical chaps. You think you understand women because you don't know what it means—to worship one."

"Larry, Larry—for God's sake shut up!" There was sharp pain in Finlay's tone. "You're talking at random. I merely cited an extreme case in the hope of pulling you up short, while there was time; and also because I have experienced, for my sins, the tragedy that may spring from the most harmless-seeming friendship under given conditions. *I* don't need telling what superlative stuff Mrs. Videlle is made of. But for all that—she's human; and you're a deal too lovable for the Platonic game. What's more, I'm half afraid she's not in love with her husband; which is worse than all. Even if she never gives way she may still suffer; and it's for *her* sake I ask you to be careful. But I've said all I can, and been cursed for my pains. For the future you can follow your own devices. I wash my hands of you."

He spoke with a vehemence very rare in him, and turning on his heel would have mounted the verandah steps; but Alan's hand came down upon his shoulder; and Alan's voice knocked at his heart.

"I say Finlay—Julian, I know I'm a graceless sort of cub; but for the sake of old times don't chuck me altogether. I'll be careful—I swear I will, if there's any risk—for her. I won't go out of my way to see too much of her; just take the chances that turn up. You can't expect a fellow to fling away the six best months of his life when no earthly harm may come of 'em. And after this, the odds are—I'll never set eyes on her again."

The words caught in his throat; and Finlay grasped the hand upon his shoulder, wringing it hard.

"I understand all that, Alan—better than you think for. Only keep your word about being careful, and, if possible, keep your head, and I'll not pester you with any more 'rugged maxims hewn from life.' After all, I suppose we're each flung down into the field to hew out our own."

## CHAPTER X.

**The only great distances in the world are those we carry within ourselves: the distances that separate husbands and wives, for instance.**
**—PINERO.**

FINLAY'S comment on Videlle hit the mark, as his comments were apt to do. The man was in that ill frame of mind when another's enjoyment seems almost a personal affront. For some reason, best known to the perverse in spirit, the talk and laughter he had interrupted made Lyndsay seem more blameworthy; and justified, to the full, his own mood of irritable aggression. Yet now, as always, her very stillness and gentle dignity had power to check the hot words that sprang to his brain; and in some mysterious fashion to hold him at arms' length, husband though he was. Very early in the day he had discovered that, for all her sweetness, and dislike of assertion, she was a woman of character, this small, self-contained wife of his; and to-night, though he had left the Club surcharged with injured husbandhood, he found himself driving beside her through the frosty dark in a protracted silence, which became every minute more difficult to break.

Not that his anger or jealousy were appeased; but that he feared lest, in an uncontrolled outpouring of his baser self, he might alienate her for good; and also that his failure to win the hidden woman kept him, still, more lover than husband at heart.

Desire to unfurl the flag of authority was keen. Desire simply to put his arm round her, in the hope of eliciting response, was keener still. But the crooked pride of his kind, that has a trick of cropping up at the wrong moment, controlled the impulse; and he drove on beside her, chafing at life in general, and awaiting a word from her to give him his cue.

But Lyndsay's capacity for silence, that so curiously enhanced her charm, served her excellently as a weapon

of defence, when she detected electricity in the air. Already her rainbow-moment, the sun-ray striking through her tears, had been quenched by the perception that, in spite of high resolves, there was no escaping the "scene" from which her fine-fibred sensibilities recoiled, as from a blow. But at least she was determined not to fire the opening shot.

Thus the silence became quick with the clash of opposing thought; with a half conscious battle of wills; till Videlle's exasperation at this intangible form of resistance eclipsed his original grievance, and goaded him into speech.

"Confound it all, Lyndsay!" he broke out, flicking Trumpeter viciously. "You might have a word or two to throw at a man who hasn't set eyes on you to-day!"

"I'm sorry. I was thinking," she answered quietly, without turning her head. "There isn't anything special to say; and I didn't know you wished me to 'make conversation.'"

"You were making it fast enough in the library! But then I'm not a six-foot Sapper, with chestnut hair and blue eyes, and the Devil's own conceit of himself into the bargain!"

"Don't talk such nonsense, Jim." Her low tone faintly hinted at scorn.

"I will if I choose," he retorted childishly, his temper gaining ground. "*You're* not going to have the upper hand all along the line. I've let you pretty well go your own way, and pick your own friends since you came out. But I expect you to keep within decent limits; and I'm hanged if I'll put up with *this* sort of thing!"

"What sort of thing?" Her head went up a fraction of an inch; and her voice had a coolness, a detached curiosity maddening to a man far gone in wrath.

"Lyndsay—what's come to you?" he cried out, peering into her half-seen face. "You know well enough what I mean:—this gadding about with officers from morning till night; off to ride with one in the morning, and driving all over the station with him in the afternoon. . . ."

Lyndsay's cheeks flamed. But she kept the door of her lips, lest hasty speech carry her too far.

"In common justice to me you might verify your facts,"

was all she said. "You might also discourage Carrie's trick of trying to make mischief between us by tale-bearing."

"Carrie? She had nothing to do with it. Our affairs are no concern of hers."

Lyndsay's quick ear detected uneasiness. She knew that he was lying; and it seemed almost as if that knowledge smirched the whiteness of her own self-respect.

"I told her that this morning," she answered coldly. "And I let her infer what she pleased. But with you—it is different. You have the right to know that my meeting with Mr. Laurence on both occasions was pure chance. So was our drive together. It happened to suit Mrs. Rivers. . . ."

Videlle interrupted her with scornful laughter.

"Suit Mrs. Rivers, indeed! If it's going to suit Mrs. Rivers to let her men friends drive you about indiscriminately, the less you go to her house the better. You may think yourself very clever, Lyndsay; but I know a sight more about Anglo-Indian officers on leave than you do. They consider it quite the smart thing to pick out a pretty woman, monopolize her, get her thoroughly talked about, and then go off to start the same little game elsewhere. But if that infernal Sapper thinks he's going to put in his time here making love to you. . . ."

"Be quiet! You *shall* not say such things to me!" The sweet, low voice vibrated with anger and disgust. "Mr. Laurence is a gentleman; and it's unjust to take away men's characters wholesale, because you have lost your temper with me. . . ." Here Videlle would again have interrupted; but she checked him with a peremptory hand, "the *sais* may not understand English, though he understands your tone of voice. If you have any more fault to find, please wait till we get in."

Then they fell back upon the silence which had better have remained unbroken. So at least thought Videlle, who had now the grace to feel ashamed of himself. But the stress of injured love too often goads a man into speech that seems its opposite.

As for Lyndsay, her husband's inaccuracy and injustice, coupled with so unusual a note of aggression, roused in her a spirit of rebellion very foreign to her nature. Keep

silence she could and would; but submission to petty tyranny was not in the bond. Already her intimacy with Mrs. Rivers had engendered bickerings and jealousies; and she began to suspect that most of her small pleasures would have to be carried at the bayonet's point, or given up. The thrill of a dawning friendship and of her closer link with the Rivers' household, emboldened her to the decision that, battle or no battle, she would hold her own in respect of both.

In silence they drew up before the house. In silence Videlle lifted his wife to the ground. A small quiver went through her at his touch; and instantly anger evaporated. The lover triumphed.

"Lyn—what is it?" he asked, trying to retain her.

"Nothing—nothing. Please let me go." And swiftly disengaging herself, she escaped into the house.

He found her by the fire in the drawing-room lost in dejected reverie, one hand clasping the high mantelshelf, her forehead resting against it; and on the fender stool one shapely foot sunned itself in the warmth of flaming logs. Had she deliberately studied effect, she could hardly have presented her husband with a vision of more appealing charm; and this time impulse mastered Videlle. He went quickly forward, and as she straightened herself, grasped her shoulders more forcibly than he knew.

"Jim—what *do* you want now?" she asked wearily, regarding him with eyes like troubled skies, more beautiful for the clouds that darkened them; eyes in whose very beauty lurked a maddening reminder of his own inability to reach the soul that dwelt in them.

"I want what I have always wanted," he answered, his tone low and concentrated. "I want—the whole heart and soul of you—that I have never had."

The words he had sworn not to speak were out now; and her gaze widened with indignation and fear.

"*Jim!* . . . "

"Oh, I know you believed yourself in love; and I believed I should win you before you discovered your mistake. But there's a bit of adamant in you somewhere. Do what I will, you only seem to slip farther away; and I can't keep up the pretence of being satisfied any longer."

Her eyes fell before the fire in his. She saw herself

prisoned with him in a tangle of lies and twisted truths; and began to realize the full cost of silence. But before she could find speech, his arms were round her; his kisses, rough and passionate, were upon her face and lips.

Response of any kind was beyond her. She could only endure; a fact Videlle was quick to detect, once the mere minute's rapture was past. And the discovery wrought a sharp revulsion of feeling, not unnatural in so mercurial a man.

"My Heavens, Lyndsay!" he cried. "You'll end by driving me crazy. I wish to God I'd never married you."

He flung her from him with such force that she stumbled backward, and almost fell into a low cane chair; her face hidden, her small frame aquiver with soundless misery.

For a full minute Videlle stood watching her, deliberately hardening his heart. Then he became aware that tears were falling from between her fingers; a rare phenomenon, seen only on the one occasion when they had spoken of her father's death. And her silent grief, so unlike Carrie's vociferous outburst of the morning, once again shifted the mood of this most variable of men. This time tenderness dominated; and going over to her, he removed her hat and caressed the rippled silkiness of her hair. A shuddering sob escaped her; and promptly he sank on one knee, his arm encircling her, while he gently uncovered her face.

"Lyn—my own darling—forgive me. I never meant to be so rough with you. But your coldness would madden any man; and sometimes it wakes the very devil in me."

She steadied her lips and faced him; her eyes, deep wells of sadness, shining softly through their film of tears.

"Indeed, I'm not a cold woman, Jim. Only—you wouldn't be content with a mockery of—the real thing. You know that. I *have* cared—as far as I know how. And I will honestly try—to care more. But I suppose you realize that a scene like to-night—in the cart—doesn't help matters forward."

He set his teeth and straightened himself. Shame burnt darkly through his sallow skin.

"Of course I do. It was caddish of me to bully you. But your silence infuriated me; and I suppose I'm a bit jealous of that long chap you've picked up all of a sudden."

"A man I've known for twenty-four hours! Jim—dear, that won't do at all! I could no more breathe in such an atmosphere than I could live under water. If you can't trust me where men are concerned, I might as well—give it up, and—go at once."

His hand closed vehemently upon hers.

"You won't do that. It's not you, darling, it's the men I can't trust. I know the breed too well."

"Then you ought to know that, except in rare instances, a man's behaviour to a woman depends mainly on herself."

He gave her a quick look of admiration.

"Jove, what a clever little woman you are!"

The shallow compliment, at such a moment, jarred her, and she frowned.

"My cleverness is beside the mark. I meant—you might trust my loyalty—as a wife."

Videlle set his lips.

"Trusting people isn't my strongest point," he said, unconsciously revealing his own untrustworthiness. "But the man who could doubt *you*, Lyn, wouldn't deserve to be your boot-black, much less your husband."

His manifest sincerity so smote her heart that, in an impulse of compassion, she passed her finger-tips over his hair, with a light, lingering touch that set all his nerves aquiver. Then she spoke on a note of deeper feeling.

"I'm glad you can honestly say that, Jim. It makes—a difference." He caught his breath on the word; and she added more lightly:

"I am sure something must have disagreed with you to-day! Was it—was it two meals alone with Carrie?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Perhaps because my breakfast disagreed with me!"

Videlle moved uneasily, and stood up.

"Carrie can be the very Devil at times," he remarked, shifting a charred log with his foot; and Lyndsay, conscious of thin ice, went forward warily.

"Is this—I mean her living here—a permanent arrangement?"

"Till she marries again."

" 'Till all the seas run dry!' " Lyndsay quoted, without looking up.

"Oh, one never knows. Men are such fools."

"I'm afraid there's a limit to their folly. But seriously, Jim," she looked up at him; entreaty in her eyes. "While she's here, things will always go crooked between you and me. And then—there is that boy."

But Videlle could stand no more.

"Damn it all, Lyndsay!" he broke out, with the helpless irritability of a man wedged between two women stronger than himself.

"Where's the use of rubbing it in, when you know quite well I can't ask her to go outright."

"But couldn't she go for a time? It's natural we should wish to be alone—at first. You might suggest—"

"My dear girl, suggestions have as much effect on Carrie as a mosquito bite on a buffalo! I tried a few when we came out,—before, in fact; but she sailed serenely past them all. The deuce of it is she's within her rights, and she knows it. So long as she's unattached, I'm bound to give her a home. It's—it's *dastur*.*

"Out *here*, you mean?"

Videlle looked round sharply.

"Well—yes. Out here. I know it's hard on you, Lyn. . . ."

But his wife rose, with a pathetic gesture of weariness; the spark of hope quenched in her eyes and in her heart.

"And knowing that, you still refuse the first big thing I've asked of you. But of course, if you prefer incessant friction to one unpleasant scene with Carrie, there is no more to be said."

Videlle, as was natural, promptly turned to say it. But the door had closed behind her, leaving him alone;—furious with himself for having refused her; furious with Carrie for barring the way to peace; and more than all, furious with the unseen Force that men call Circumstance, Kismet, Luck, according to the faith that is in them. For Videlle, at such times, there was but one consolation, and he found it in his study, behind the door of his private cupboard; while Lyndsay knelt by her bed in the dark, her whole soul concentrated in a wordless prayer for strength to "take the hap" of her own deed; strength not to turn back in the day of battle.

* Custom.

## CHAPTER XI.

The event itself is pure water from the pitcher of Fate: but even as the soul may be wherein it finds shelter, so will the event become sad or joyous—deadly, or quick with life.

—MAETERLINCK.

NOT least among the marvels of the human soul, is its power to do and endure things deemed by the natural man beyond achievement and endurance.

Had anyone prophesied to Lyndsay Videlle that knowledge of her husband's Hindu parentage, of his deliberate duplicity and of the true state of her own heart, would be accepted in silence, and leave their relations outwardly unchanged, she would have repudiated the prediction as unthinkable. Still less would she have credited the possibility of enjoying life in such conditions, and even of retaining a compassionate tenderness for the man who, while ardently loving her, had, by his own act, wrecked his slender chance of success.

Yet so it befel, in the weeks that followed her day of struggle and victory, and final despair. And it is just this stimulant of uncertainty in our pilgrimage towards the Unrevealed, that constitutes Life's crowning charm. Without uncertainty—which is twin brother to mystery—could be neither romance, nor poetry, nor the high courage that stakes all on a turn of the wheel. Without the magnetism of a veiled To-morrow eternally beckoning, and eternally out of reach, how many thousands would sink under burdens too grievous to be borne; and thus lose the guerdon awaiting them on the silver side of the cloud.

So Lyndsay Videlle, upheld by some indefinable flicker of hope, faced her small world with serenely smiling eyes that baffled sympathy and curiosity alike. So, too, she—who in days of winged ideals had aspired to "hitch her waggon to a star"—learnt, in plodding through the "dust of the actual," that duty and sacrifice may be

accomplished with never a star overhead; that it may even be the height of heroism to stumble undismayed through the Valley of Humiliation, without them. And Lyndsay was a proud woman,—proud and sensitive. The stones of the Valley hurt her feet. The Dead Sea fruit of it was bitter in her mouth. But to her, as to all followers of the "Whisper and the Vision," came the "Power with the Need." Let who will sneer at her folly;—a term commonly applied to the unworldly wisdom that has strength enough to efface itself; to understand and pity and condone. In her eyes, the fact that Videlle possibly deserved to lose her, did not avail to cancel her belief in the sacredness of marriage, or her own given word; and in truth her loyalty was to these rather than to the individual man.

For him the weeks brought increase of hope, and decrease of the dread that had darkened his first weeks in India. Daily his sense of security deepened. Lyndsay was either more ignorant or less discerning than he had supposed. So much the better.

And relief had its inevitable effect upon his temper, which fact, in its turn, helped to make the rough places smoother for his wife.

Beyond this, one only change was noticeable in the daily life of the bungalow. Videlle now made a point of shielding his wife, so far as might be, from the shafts of Carrie's spite and ill-humour. He even ventured to snub Monty sharply, on more than one occasion, when the boy's repellent tricks of speech and manner were clearly jarring on her nerves; and this, in the teeth of scathing diatribes from Carrie upon vipers who repudiated their own flesh and blood. It was all he could do by way of atonement; and without reverting to the vexed question, Lyndsay let him see that she understood.

Could he have been oftener at home, her life might have been easier. But his recent appointment as Medical Officer, on special plague duty, was no sinecure. Cholera men have always with them, from Tuticorin to Peshawur. But cholera's twin scourge, plague, was at that time newly arrived on the Frontier; and the authorities—still hopeful of killing the snake in the egg—waxed zealous over measures sanitary and preventive; over

house-to-house visitation through the city and outlying villages, in search of cases secreted by the Faithful, who would sooner sow disease broadcast in the land than defile their own sacred corner of it with whitewash, disinfectants, and promiscuous burnings; a difference of opinion apt to breed complications in a country where godliness and uncleanliness are brothers in blood.

As a doctor, Videlle was keen and capable, with a taste for scientific research which had brought him into touch with the Civil Surgeon—a rough-and-ready bachelor, devoid of colour prejudice—in whose amateur laboratory the two spent much of their spare time, testing theories, arguing and experimenting, marshalling forces, seen and unseen, for their bloodless, world-without-end campaign against disease and death. To Videlle's innate liking for his profession, was added a zeal born of Lyndsay's frank interest in its every phase and detail. Here, at least, was a natural bond of sympathy; and she made the most of it; drawing him on to voice his perplexities and discouragements; divining and stimulating his secret ambitions as only the beloved woman can. Till he began to dream that the road to distinction might also be the road to her heart; and devoted more time than ever to the elusive plague bacillus.

As for Lyndsay, she found herself caught up and swept, unresisting, along the cheerful current of cold weather station life; the more readily because a home pervaded by Carrie and Monty—whom Finlay, at first sight, had christened "Gummy"—was calculated to drive a less sensitive woman into the arms of any distraction that kept her elsewhere;—a fact shrewdly suspected by Carrie and stored up in a pigeon-hole of her memory, among other scores, to be repaid with interest when opportunity offered. Videlle himself was not often free to go out with his wife; nor had he any real relish for the sociabilities, hampered as he was by his Eurasian talent for detecting "slights" and insinuations undreamed-of by any brain but his own.

Thus, Lyndsay's intimacy with Monica Rivers, fostered by circumstance, grew and deepened with a rapidity that is, perhaps, only possible in India. For in a land so lavish of sunshine and colour, of things beautiful and terri-

ble, a land of such vast spaces and wide horizons, the human heart seems, instinctively, to attune itself to the keynote of the whole. Certain it is that either the life or the atmosphere tends to breed a splendid lack of economy in giving —whether of time, or sympathy, or house-room—that imparts to the swift yet singularly enduring friendships of India an essence all their own. But the world of Anglo-India, great-hearted though it be, has also, like every other human aggregate, its element of infinite littleness; its obsession of the personal and the official; and the fact that Monica Rivers was also "Mrs. Commissioner" inevitably influenced the station at large. Callers multiplied; and Carrie preened her feathers accordingly. From the *dhirzi's* corner in the back verandah issued heart-rending parodies of Lyndsay's trousseau "frocks." Followed occasional invitations to tennis, and even to dinner-parties; not the cheery little gatherings of eight or ten marked "intimates only"; but "duty" dinners, given by those whose pay and position impelled them to obey the unwritten law of the country: "Thou shalt entertain."

These last were accepted mainly because both husband and wife welcomed an evening's respite from their own home atmosphere. For when it came to dinners, Peshawur drew the line at "the Vansittart"—Finlay again!—and the persistent omission of her name became a grievance, which, with the gross injustice of her kind, Carrie secretly set down to Lyndsay's score.

And Laurence?

What of the conflict involved in his decision to remain? This much, at least can be recorded to his credit—that he took pains to keep his given word; and if there were occasional lapses from grace, well—the man had youth's hot blood and the master-force of Nature arrayed against the unseen, spiritual thing that was himself. That he did wrong in remaining cannot be denied. But if all men were foredoomed to follow righteousness, the gift of Free Will would be an ironic superfluity; and this our noble and terrible ante-room to the Beyond would not be the inimitable school for character that it is.

But good resolves notwithstanding, the daily gatherings at the Club, and the incessant round of sociabilities,

indigenous to India, gave ample opportunity for sight and sound of the unattainable woman, and even for intimate talk, that confirmed at every turn the lightning impulse of love. Mrs. Rivers herself unwittingly paved the way to closer acquaintance by absorbing both into her little coterie of friends, who foregathered two or three times a week, either in her drawing-room or garden.

And if Laurence refrained from forcing opportunities, he was human enough to make good those that came his way; the more so because the memory of his blunder still rankled, and inclination squared with a chivalrous instinct to atone for that which had not been possible, save for his own headlong folly. And for once, Fate—having translated his crown of life into a crown of thorns—seemed disposed towards atonement also. The lending of that first book had proved an open sesame to a mutual enthusiasm, doubly welcome because neither had looked for it in the other. Lyndsay discovered, with a thrill of fellow-feeling, that this maker of things practical, with the mathematician's brow, and the spirits of a schoolboy, was also, deep down, an artist in embryo; that his natural instinct for the music of words fairly matched her own; while Laurence, intent on fuller knowledge of the marvel that is woman, gradually penetrated beyond her simplicity, her mere alluring charm, to the ardour of imagination and intellect underlying both. Nor could all her reticence and loyalty prevent love's insight from detecting unappropriated forces in her soul; longings never satisfied; unwitting indications that, in spite of marriage, her essential self still stood apart—unmated and alone. Dangerous knowledge, this; tempting him to the belief that here at least he was on legitimate ground; that there could be no trespass in appropriating elements in her that had never belonged to that other; nor ever could.

But he had Lyndsay herself to reckon with. For all her loneliness of spirit, her quick response to the touch of a poetic mind, she could not lightly admit a stranger into a sanctuary of thought and feeling hitherto sacred to the dear, unforgetable father, who had fashioned it for himself alone. Yet there was a rare element of persuasiveness in this particular stranger; a mingling of modesty and assured manliness not easily withstood. His very readi-

ness to respect the small reserves that held him, gently yet inexorably, in check, proved a surer means of dispelling them than either guessed. And thus it came to pass that within a month of their first dance together—a month equivalent to three or four in less favourable conditions—she found herself breaking the silence of two years; telling him of her father, of his work, and her own modest share in it, while they strolled together in the half light, along a path bordering Mrs. Rivers' tennis courts, where a desperate final was in progress.

She spoke in a low, even voice, her eyes intent upon the darkening sky, that was already melting into their own mysterious colour. It seemed almost as if she were thinking aloud; and Laurence listened to her thoughts, that were for him alone, with an interest too rapt, too exalted for speech.

The dusk deepened every moment. Stars that were neither gold nor silver flickered into life. The players deserted the courts for the refreshment table, whence came talk and laughter; Gwen's light-hearted ripples of mirth; the flat, scholastic tones of Mr. Garstin, laying down the law on Punitive Expeditions. But the two who paced the path near the bungalow were hundreds of miles away from it all, in a book-lined study of a small house in Wiltshire.

Suddenly she paused and looked up at him; shy apology in her eyes.

"I don't quite know why I am telling you all this," she said. "I haven't spoken of him yet—to anyone. And it seems unkind, doesn't it, never to speak of those who are gone? As if we had wiped them out of our lives. But it is difficult . . . there are so few . . ."

The broken sentence stirred him to the depths. "It is more than good of you to count me among them," he answered simply.

"I think what you said about his work the other day—before you guessed—made me want you to know more of him. I wonder if you would like to look through my copy of his poems—bound specially for me."

"Your copy? I would never have dared to ask. Will you lend it me—really?"

"I should love to. I'll send it round to-morrow."

"Not to-night?"

She smiled at his characteristic impatience.

"Certainly. If you wish it."

"I do wish it—immensely."

"Very well. You can keep it a week; and we'll talk it over when I come back from camp."

"Camp? Where?"

"Only a short tour of inspection."

"Plague?"

"Yes."

"But he surely won't take you with him on that sort of job?"

"I think he will—if I ask him. I went when we first came out. It wasn't so bad then. But still—"

"You can't go. He's no business to take you."

In the heat of the moment he forgot that he had even less business to dictate to her. "What does Mrs. Rivers say?"

To his surprise, her own deep voice answered him, as she came up from behind and slipped a hand through Lyndsay's arm. "Mrs. Rivers says you've monopolized her daughter quite long enough and it's high time you both came in!"

After that he could get no word alone with her; and cantered home in a sufficiently complicated mood of mind.

Dimly he began to be aware of changes, readjustments, wrought in him, during the past month, by contact with a spirit stainless as driven snow; to know that in these days his mother's impressionable soul had full dominion over him; transforming the happy-hearted worker, that he had been among the mountains, into a lover—half soldier, half poet—imbued with the ardours and intuitions of an idealized passion. The recklessness of despair had been doggedly combatted; while the nature of the woman and of the permanent barrier between, had conspired to lift his feeling for her to a level it might not else have attained. For upon him, as upon Videlle, Lyndsay was unconsciously exerting the essential woman's power that is vested in *being* rather than *doing;* a power that, to the end of time, will sway the souls of men.

More and more Laurence delighted in her unique blending of high mental development with a child's divine lack of worldly wisdom, a child's divine detachment from the unbecoming aspects of life. To-night, in breaking through her reserve, and admitting him into the sanctuary of her sorrow, she had given him fresh proof of friendship, of her transparent faith in him; a faith he swore to justify, however severe the strain upon his importunate heart and will.

A sentence he had read somewhere recurred to him. "Love seeks to give, whereas, passion seeks only to take." Well—since all thought of taking was denied him, he would give—and give—and give; proving the finer quality of his love by frank response to her need for mental comradeship, and by stepping no whit beyond it, even in thought. The definite decision heartened him. He urged the Kabuli forward, and drew in great breaths of the keen night air. The untarnished boy in him had not yet outgrown the thrill of those high resolves which it is the prerogative of youth to make and break with an equal zest. Proud of the new privilege vouchsafed him; strong in the strength of his young self-confidence; he saw himself henceforward master of Fate and captain of his soul. Finlay might doubt him still. Probably did. But that was "Finlay's way." It did not occur to him that his friend might have attained self knowledge; and that to attain it, men must fall.

Arrived at the bungalow, he found Finlay and O'Gorman changing for Mess; a big night, with Rivers and Mr. Garstin as guests of the evening. Laurence was dining out, and glad of it; since he could escape the sooner, and enjoy an hour or so of quiet in the empty house, with Vereker's poems for company. The book came just as he was starting; a thing of austere beauty in vellum and gold; and all through dinner his thoughts hovered about it, to the annoyance of his partner, who set down his abstraction to the Sapper's proverbial conceit, and disability for small talk.

At ten he escaped, in spite of protest; and not till then did the evening begin for him. A roaring log fire, a low cane chair, his coat exchanged for a smoking jacket, a lamp and a long tumbler at his elbow;—in such luxury

of comfort and solitude he gave himself up to a night of communing with the man who had created, in the fullest sense, the woman he loved.

Her name on the dedication page dashed him from the heights. "To Lyndsay Vereker, a tribute of admiration from her father." And underneath a sonnet of faultless beauty. If only he had found her then! If only—if only—! That broken cry voices the acme of human tragedy.

But to-night tragedy was "not admitted"; and Laurence, passing resolutely on to the poems themselves, reaped his reward by forgetting his heartache in pure enjoyment of their fantasy, power and charm, while here and there, in faint pencillings against verse or line, Lyndsay herself spoke to him from the printed page. Had she never done more, he wondered, than criticise and inspire? And, as if in reply, there fell from between the two last pages a thin folded sheet of foolscap. He opened it with a thrill of expectation; and Vereker's genius sank to insignificance at sight of two short poems in her delicate, self-contained handwriting; the first, a lyric, in irregular metre, a pure pæan of joy: the second, a roundel headed "The Keynote of Life." This it was that arrested Laurence, striking twin shafts of pain and ecstasy through his heart.

He read and re-read it, till the music of her voice sounded through its soul-stirring note of command.

> Love, till thy leaping pulses faint and fail,
> Till whirling worlds and all the woes thereof
> Fade into nothingness; till suns turn pale—
> Love!
>
> Love to the full height, depth and breadth whereof
> Thy soul is master. Let unloved ones rail;
> But hold thou still thy fearless flame above
>
> Their shadowed heads, lending them light to scale
> The utmost heights, whereon Love's lovers move,
> In blest content, for that their souls exhale
> Love!

Glowing words, coined in the heart of fire that burnt deep down beneath her surface stillness; so deep, that even the father, who monopolized it, had scarce lived long enough to gauge the heights and depths of her woman's

genius for devotion. To Laurence, the mere hint of it was a revelation on which he dared not dwell. None the less it set him wondering how she, who could strike life's keynote with so sure and impassioned a touch, had been drawn into the disaster of an apparently loveless marriage; till closer consideration showed him that here was no red flame of earth, but a white flame of the spirit; that Love the Divine Impulse, not Love the great Volcano, had inspired the little poem. In its simplicity and intensity he recognised the essence of the woman distilled into words, that half a dozen readings stamped upon his brain: a possession for all time.

To-night he hardly saw himself an unhappy man, baulked in the strongest desire he had yet known; but rather as one blest beyond his desert. So true it is that happiness dwells not in the event, but in a man's power of wielding it; of constraining even the fiery sword that bars his entry into Paradise to cleave for him a passage to the heights.

Just before midnight the sound of returning wheels roused him; and being in no mood for mess-room talk, even with Finlay, he sprang out of his chair, laid his treasure on a table near his bed, and three minutes later blew out the lamp.

## CHAPTER XII

**Little Life has got to offer; little Man to lose—**
**Since To-day Fate deigns to proffer, wherefore then refuse?**
**For To-day, lit by your laughter, between the crushing years,**
**I would chance in the Hereafter an Eternity of tears.**
**—Lawrence Hope.**

Laurence woke late, and sauntered into Mess long after Finlay and O'Gorman had left.

A new question perturbed his mind. Was his discovery accidental? Or had she wished him to know? The mere possibility so elated him that he could not let her go into camp till he had his answer. And there was only one way to ensure seeing her; the one way he had avoided hitherto. He could call to say good-bye; and manage to secure a few words with her alone. No one need know, except the "Vansittart woman," who obviously didn't count. He was too young to realize that half the insect miseries of life are traceable to the people who "don't count."

For once he blest the calling hours of India that did not compel him to wait till the afternoon. The midday gun released him; and by half-past twelve he was trotting down the Mall, towards the shabby bungalow near the hospital, in a happier, more exalted mood than he had know since the night of the Gunners' Ball.

But Destiny—the Unseen Wrestler—chooses always such moments of exaltation for the intrusion of some trivial mischance that rudely jolts the exalted one back into the dust.

In Alan's case the intrusive triviality was Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr, in a brick-dust coat and skirt, perched on the box-seat of a high dog-cart; the last woman he wished to meet just then. He knew enough of her to realize that he had bitterly hurt her vanity, by ignoring her obvious readiness

to accept him as personal *attaché* for the season; and by declining upon an intimacy of which she had expressed open disapproval. There had been a coolness, in consequence; to Alan's secret relief. But this morning she seemed in a coming-on disposition; flourished her whip for greeting; and halted at his approach.

"Evil communications corrupt good manners!" she remarked with jocose emphasis. "You haven't been near me for over a week! But I suppose you're too *busy* these days?"

He evaded the thrust with a good-natured laugh.

"Oh, awfully busy! It's amazing how the time gets filled up with nothing in particular."

Her eyebrows arched elaborately. "I thought it was something *very* particular just now!—But as you seem to be unattached this morning, you may come up and take me for a drive. My man can lead your horse home, and we'll have tiffin at Stella's. Her husband's in camp; and Captain Denbigh will be there. You don't *deserve* it, of course! But you're one of those irritating people that one can't be angry with for long."

For a moment, Laurence was nonplussed. Natural graciousness made refusal hateful to him. But to-morrow—Lyndsay would be gone.

"It's awfully kind of you," he said with his most convincing smile. "Any other morning—I should be delighted. But to-day—I'm engaged—"

"*Engaged* are you?" she echoed, her face on fire. "One needn't ask *where*. No wonder the time gets filled up, if you spend *every* morning in Mrs. Videlle's pocket, and meet her at Mrs. Rivers' *every* afternoon! Please don't trouble to keep a free day for me. There are dozens of other men in Peshawur!—*Good*-bye."

And without giving him time to answer, she swept on in a cloud of dust and wrath; leaving him irate with himself and her, and the malign chance that had brought them together at such a moment.

That he, who had so striven after prudence, for Lyndsay's sake, should, by one heedless impulse, have exposed her to comments and implications of the Berkeley-Kerr type jerked him very effectually back into the dust. Besides, he liked to stand well with his world. It was

one of his small weaknesses. And he knew now that this woman's tongue would give him no quarter.

On nearing the bungalow he slackened speed. After all, perhaps he would not go in. There lurked yet another snake in the grass, whose power to strike he now saw more clearly. If Lyndsay were out, Mrs. Vansittart would certainly hear him arrive, and ask him in; and his shaken self-confidence shrank from encountering two types of the aggressive feminine in one morning. He would go on to the Commissioner's house in the hope that Lyndsay might look in to say good-bye. A glance towards the bungalow strengthened the resolve. For there, in the front verandah, Carrie had established herself with untidy paraphernalia of workstand and magazines, with Gummy the ubiquitous, sprawling at her feet. Laurence was irresistibly reminded of a fat brown spider, watchful and motionless in the midst of her web; and he consoled himself with the thought that even if Lyndsay were at home, that unspeakable woman would not vouchsafe them one moment to themselves.

By the time he reached Mr. Rivers' house his elastic spirit had revived. Voices and laughter sounded through the open doors of the drawing-room; and within he found the thing he sought.

Mrs. Rivers and Lyndsay sat on the deep cushioned sofa. Gwen, on the fender stool, hands clasping her knees, her golden eyes full of laughter, was listening entranced to Finlay's account of the finest guest night on record. He still wore khaki; having dropped in after his work, for an hour of enjoyment unshadowed by Everett's presence.

"You missed a rare treat, Larry, by not being on the spot last night," he went on, after greetings. "Mr. Garstin tackling old Blunderbore on Frontier defence was great! The dear old Colonel's as much astray among theories and political quibbles as he is all there when it comes to handling his men in action. One could see him effervescing internally at his inability to knock the bottom out of glib arguments coined in Westminster; and every minute I thought the cork would fly off. But the Colonel controlled himself like a man; though I couldn't swear how things might have ended, but for a provi-

dential interlude that was the cream of the evening. No doubt your father told you?"

Instinctively he questioned Gwen. "No, I hardly saw him alone before he went out. He seemed in a very twinkly mood. But Mr. Garstin was so subdued that I didn't dare ask questions. What happened? I'm pining to know."

"Nothing alarming—for Peshawur. The joke was its coming at the psychological moment. Mr. Garstin was in full swing; talking like a book about the gentle Pathan, contrasting his manly virtues with our aggressive inroads on his country and independence—when two shots outside made the Honourable Member drop his fork—by accident! Shouts and a scuffle, and more shots, sent young Benson flying out to investigate. Rifle thieves, of course. One of our sentries mortally hit and his rifle taken. But the other, being a Pathan himself, and up to all the dodges of the trade, bagged his man, by shamming wounded, when the first shot whizzed past his shoulder, and keeping a sharp look-out in the opposite direction! Sure enough there came crawling out of the darkness the scoundrel who would have knifed him, and bolted with his rifle, while he was looking the other way. Benson brought the story back with him; and of course that started us off yarning about night assaults, murdered sentries, and so on; O'Gorman, full of 'fizz' and inspiration giving us the lead. Mr. Garstin's face—passing gradually from mild interest to acute discomfort—was as good as a play; and I fancy our remarks caused him to think, for he didn't say 'Pathan' all the rest of the evening! Old Blunderbore remarked to me afterwards that the Commissioner must be a saint to have put up with the fellow for nearly a week."

Mrs. Rivers smiled and nodded, not ill-pleased.

"Colonel Brandon isn't blest with Alec's sense of humour. He sees the man's in earnest, and rather enjoys the joke of having his 'prejudiced, parochial' outlook on Frontier problems enlarged by an amateur administrator, who has studied his subject exhaustively—on paper! But Alec will probably turn the tables before he goes."

Gwen chuckled gleefully.

"To-morrow perhaps, at Lundi Kotal! Can't Mr. Laurence come too, Mum, as he missed the guest night?"

"Of course. I quite meant to ask you," she added, turning to him. "But Gwen never gives me a chance! It's a whole day's outing. The carriage leaves at half-past eight. I am sending Lyndsay to countenance Gwen, who insists on going; and if you and Captain Finlay go in his trap, it will be quite a family party!"

"Thanks. I should like it immensely," Laurence replied, glancing at Lyndsay, who smiled at the question in his eyes.

"My husband wouldn't take me into camp after all," she said. "And Mrs. Rivers has persuaded me to spend a week with her instead."

"Great luck for all of us, isn't it Mr. Laurence?" quoth irrepressible Gwen.

"Great luck," he agreed, looking thoughtfully into the fire.

Five minutes later Finlay rose to go and Laurence must needs follow suit. But the morrow gleamed like a star on the horizon; and he was content to wait.

"Drive back with me, Larry," Finlay said, as they left the house; and Laurence dismissed his pony.

Both men lit cigars and smoked contentedly. Then Finlay looked round with a quizzical smile.

"Not half bad," said he in a non-committal tone.

"Rather not! First rate."

That was all. But by some mysterious flash of fellow-feeling Laurence lighted on the truth.

"I say, Julian," he ventured, after a moment's hesitation—"I see how it is—"

But this time Finlay turned sharply; a crease between his brows.

"*Do* you, old chap? Very perspicacious of you! Probably you see all wrong. But I'd rather not argue the point."

After which no more could be said. Yet Laurence knew he was right; and the knowledge drew him measurably nearer to the hidden man who was his friend.

A night of sharp frost gave them a morning heavenly blue and clear, the air exhilarating as champagne; an

ideal Frontier morning. By nine o'clock the Commissioner's landau—followed by Finlay's cart and escorted by a small party of Khyber Rifles—had rolled out beyond the last of the barracks and bungalows into the twelve-mile road that runs level to the foothills, where dusky purples were already giving place to the reds and grey-greens of crescent day. The sun still hovered near the eastern heights; his far-flung radiance throwing into sharp relief black peaks, black domes of temples swelling out of the formless dark of the city, and intricate black traceries of leafless twigs.

Two days a week the Khyber Pass is guarded for the benefit of traders and travellers; and this day being one, the wide white road was alive with traffic of a casual leisurely kind. Caravans of camels, mules and shaggy-looking mountaineers sauntering in from the heart of Asia to haggle with the merchants of Peshawur City; strings of buffaloes laden with sugar cane, trailing clouds of dust, for glory; the peasants in charge, shapeless rolls of grey blanket propelled by two bare legs shivering in the frosty air. Now and again came buffaloes more highly honoured; ropes through their nostrils, baggy-trousered Pathans astride upon their haunches, water-bottles bobbing against their sides. Dogs there were also of the jackal type; and fair-faced women of the North who have never known the tyranny of the veil. And, on either side, rough pasture-land, blotched with brown villages, took the morning impassively, without noticeable wakening to life.

All these things Mr. Garstin, M. P., scrutinized through gold-rimmed *pince-nez*, with eyes earnest and short-sighted as the brain behind them, that was sedulously pigeon-holing details for future use. A neutral-tinted man, well past fifty, this critic of things beyond his ken; narrow and opinionated, and quick to scent the battle of controversy from afar; yet honest up to his lights; a virtue that cloaks almost as many sins as charity's self. Beside him Mr. Rivers, looking pitifully grey and lined, leaned back with half-closed eyes, leaving Gwen to do the honours of the road; an arrangement fully appreciated by his guest. For the girl, eager always to serve her father, had so zealously and engagingly taken

over charge that Mr. Garstin was in danger of seeing visions and dreaming dreams; even to the extent of reflecting that a man is not necessarily too old for possibilities because he will never see fifty again. But to-day the chastening effect of his night at Mess still lingered. His belief in the oppressed Afridi was shaken—for the moment; and had dignity permitted, the outing should have been postponed. The hills, as they neared them, had a harsh, threatening aspect, heightened by the stern preparedness of Jamrud Fort, where tongas waited to carry them at a hand gallop along the winding track that links India with Afghanistan. The long low building—its ramparts and squat round towers slit for guns—lay guarding the mouth of the pass like a crouched lion, motionless yet unsleeping; ready to strike at a moment's notice.

"Looks like business," Laurence remarked on a note of approval, as the party alighted.

"Quite so," Mr. Garstin agreed sententiously, while adjusting his pocket camera. "And it seems to me that we foster the spirit of antagonism in this part of the world by our metaphorical attitude of one hand on the swordhilt."

Mr. Rivers smiled.

"Self-defence apart, it's the only attitude respected by men whose gods are the rifle and the Afghan knife."

"Possibly, my dear sir, possibly. But surely it is ours to enlighten their barbarism; to inculcate the benefits of husbandry, of peace and good will."

"Changing the Ethiopian's skin is less simple than it sounds," Mr. Rivers remarked drily. "But as to establishing peace and good will, that is the aim of every right-minded Frontier officer. And if our progress is not brilliant—well—what can you expect, when Government puts a premium on mismanagement by decorating more readily for successful campaigns than for successful administration without them? All the same, a wholesome respect for the sword is essential to supremacy in the East—as elsewhere; and loss of it would involve the loss of all that the heroes of '57 died to win. But the tongas are waiting. The front seat will give you a good view of the country."

Mr. Garstin peered doubtfully at the bearded, eagle-eyed Pathan driver in poshteen and peaked headgear.

"But surely—the ladies . . . ?"

"Mrs. Videlle goes in the second tonga, and my daughter would rather sit behind with me—eh, Gwen?"

"Oh, much rather!" she answered with an admirably small smile.

And in three minutes they were off, escort and all, clattering full speed, as only tongas can clatter, over the military road that climbs and dips and twists between chaotic crumplings of rock, looming mysterious through a dazzle of sun and dust. Eastward the greater hills formed a regal procession of sun-kissed peaks sharply etched upon the blue. At intervals, against the skyline, moving figures and the glint of bayonets denoted a picket on duty; and everywhere enclosed farms, native towers, British forts—machicolated and steel-shuttered—bespoke a sense of insecurity, distressing and possibly disturbing to Mr. Garstin's anti-military soul.

In less than an hour a sharp turn of the road revealed a tent in a grassy dip, where they halted to change horses. Then on again, to the music of hoofs and tonga-bars; through higher hills that broke boldly into gorges and chasms—strongholds of night, and of those whose deeds are evil; past Afghan gypsy encampments, where dogs rushed out barking, while donkeys and buffaloes stood at gaze; past embattled Afridi villages, the men hidden behind loop-holed enclosures, rifle in hand, waiting to take blood for blood; the women working in fields without the walls, where also the dead slept under piles of loose stones; an efflorescence of red-and-white flags marking the tombs of local saints.

Lyndsay, unlike Mr. Garstin, had found courage to refuse the front seat, as being "too near the man;" and Finlay had accepted, with secret satisfaction, a position which set him opposite the girl whose laughter-haunted lips and eyes held, for him, more of wonder and divinity than all the glories of earth and sky.

She sat close to her father, one hand through his arm; and frankly telegraphed messages of enjoyment to the man she regarded as "mother's friend," and who accepted the self-imposed rôle, not always without bitterness. But to-day bitterness was far from him. To-day, her mere propinquity sufficed; and the fact that, despite

Everett's absence, she seemed happier than usual. Once, greatly daring, he caught and held her eyes in a prolonged gaze, that probed deep and deeper, till the blood stole softly into her cheeks, and she became of a sudden preternaturally absorbed in the hills; leaving Finlay to flounder in masculine bewilderment as to the possible significance of that blush. It was his first glimpse of Gwen, the woman; and it disorganized the studied self-repression of months.

That Laurence rejoiced need hardly be recorded; while Lyndsay, all unaware of ministering to their content, sat lost in contemplation of a world wholly new to her; a world harsh and unlovely, yet full of the magnetism of stark strength and stirring historic association. Something of this Laurence understood; and being, by now, familiar with her "other-worldly moods," he curbed his own impatience till they were well past Ali Musjid. Now and again she would turn to him with an eager question or exclamation; and at last he took his chance.

"Better than touring round in search of plague cases, eh?" he hazarded by way of opening.

"Yes—oh, yes—" Then she checked herself. "All the same—I did want to go. But he wouldn't hear of it. And he's so thorough over his work that perhaps he is best alone."

For an instant her eyes challenged his; and he read her thought. His frankness on that fatal night would never be forgotten; and any fact that seemed to refute his statements was delicately underlined for his consideration.

"Well—the rest of us are grateful to him, as Miss Rivers said!" he answered with a disarming smile. "It would have been tantalizing to wait a week for a talk with you about your father's poems."

The magic word awakened her as he knew it would. Her eyes shone.

"They *are* fine, aren't they? One has the right to feel proud."

"Indeed, yes. And he—clearly thought the same."

Her smile had a wistfulness that smote the man's heart.

"That was just his partiality, as a father."

"Why not his insight—as a poet?"

At that a wave of colour flooded her face. "Oh—you mean those things of mine! I forgot . . ."

"You knew they were there?"

The question was out at last.

"Yes—I meant to put them away. But I lost myself in one of his; and forgot, till after the book had gone."

"And—you were sorry?"

"No; not that. I thought it might please you. And I knew you wouldn't be hypercritical; that you would understand the impulsion to try one's wings, even if one can never hope to reach the stars."

"It did please me; and I do understand," he said, not daring to add further praise. "Do you never—try your wings now?"

"No."

"But you will again—some day? You must. For you are truly an artist."

"Am I?" Again that wistful smile. "I used to hope so once; when I breathed inspiration, and lived among the stars. But since—he left me, I seem to have lost my way to them for good. And now, I think I would rather be—truly a woman. But that's enough about me. It was father's work you wanted to talk of, not mine."

And they talked without interruption till the tongas drew up at Lundi Kotal; a lonely outpost, close upon the Afghan border. Here stood the Fort, riddled with loopholes, and set in the midst of hills that grew rocks and stones for trees; its sole link with India the twenty-mile track along which the travellers had come; its garrison recruited from the tribes around, and handled by two British subalterns of the type that Indian service breeds—light-hearted, self-reliant boys, with the straight glance and the crease between the brows that bespeak experience of responsibility and command.

Within, all was order and cleanliness; and the mess-room lunch was an unqualified success. Followed an exhaustive inspection of the Fort, to a running accompaniment of questions, relevant and otherwise, from the man who believed in peace at any price, with or without honour. Nevertheless, he was clearly impressed; and the subalterns, gleaning volumes from a casual twitch of Finlay's eyelid, enjoyed the joke with the reserved

vivacity of their kind. Still more did they enjoy the unwonted pleasure of entertaining ladies—young, attractive and intelligently interested in the whole situation. Lyndsay was fairly monopolized; to Alan's disgust. But Finlay secured half an hour's stroll with Gwen, whose rare mood of serious softness filled him with unreasoning content; even while it made him feel more conspicuously battered and ugly, and unworthy to touch anything but the hem of her life.

For all except Alec Rivers, the last moment came too soon; and before leaving, Laurence had a word aside with his friend.

"Look here, Julian," he said, not without awkwardness, "you might go back in the landau, like a good chap. I want the cart."

Finlay probed him with a glance disconcertingly keen. "Do you indeed? I like your coolness! But still—you're welcome to the trap. You know best how far you can safely go."

Laurence tugged at his moustache. "I wouldn't swear to that. I only know I'm human; and I mean to have this one drive with her—if she'll come."

She did come, simply and readily; glad to give him pleasure. Finlay had the satisfaction of sharing the "beauty seat" with Gwen, who begged her father to sit "forwards"; and Rivers, being tired and in pain had obeyed without demur.

As for Mr. Garstin, weariness was far from him. His misgivings had evaporated. Returning scatheless from the lion's jaws, his clothes and lungs fulfilled with Afghan dust, he overflowed with complacency and polysyllabic comments on the day's events. Clearly those subalterns had struck him as phenomenal. Not that he was extensively acquainted with the genus,—he informed them with laboured facetiousness; but from what one had gathered, one had not precisely anticipated—a propitiatory glance at Finlay—anything so capable and well informed, so manifestly in earnest as those two young fellows, buried alive in the hills, with a minimum of recreation and a maximum of work. One had always imagined—perhaps erroneously—he paused to clear his throat, and Finlay could resist no longer.

"Why mince matters, Mr. Garstin?" he said suavely. "The British 'sub' is reputed idle and empty-headed by those who label human beings wholesale like jam-jars; and in some cases, I own, the label fits him a shade too well! But he has his points, like other worthless folk; and India, being a serious country, has the knack of developing them. We're none of us here just to draw 'princely pay,' shoot and play polo and wave the Union Jack—not even the 'boys'!"

Rivers nodded approval.

"Well said, Finlay! The Staff Corps subaltern's one of the finest products of the country; and on the Frontier you have him at his best. Nothing like hard work, active service and responsibility for making first-class men, and uprooting the amateurish pose of bored detachment that obtains among too many soldiers at home. Boys up here must be frankly keen—and versatile. Mere text-book formulæ would never convert a handful of hard-bitten Border ruffians into the smart, reliable soldiers you saw to-day. It's character that does it—character, and a sound working acquaintance with languages, ethnology, and human nature; to say nothing of a sense of humour! And the fellows at Lundi Kotal are not exceptions, by any means."

Finlay's grave eyes kindled. "I never knew you thought so well of the *góra-lōg*,* sir," said he.

"Well, you know it now! We Frontier Politicals have good reason to appreciate the young British officer; knowing better than most what India owes to his vitality and pluck. It's one of the few subjects on which I can wax eloquent!" And in defiance of weariness, he roused himself to further enlightenment of the guest who had set out to enlighten him!

Finlay listened with a warm glow at his heart; and once, during an animated argument, ventured an amused aside to Gwen: "A red-letter day for the nation, eh? Mr. Garstin, M.P., discovers the British subaltern! Your father's contributing a valuable chapter to the Book. You'll see!"

And the girl—finger on lip—twinkled radiant response.

* Soldiers.

The sun's rim had touched the hills before they sighted Peshawur, lying in a purple haze, with all India behind it. Mr. Rivers had leaned back exhausted. Gwen and Finlay spoke fitfully in undertones. The sun dipped; vanished; and the first breath of night blew chill upon their faces. The immense quiet of earth and sky seemed to compel silence. Even Mr. Garstin grew pensive, revolving new ideas.

But as they neared a mud-walled village on the rim of cantonments, the silence was rent by shouts, angry and expostulant, within the walls. Following upon this a solitary figure appeared in the void; a long-limbed Pathan, of commanding build who shook a fist at the shouting invisibles as he went.

Mr. Garstin leaned forward eagerly, probing the dusk; and the man, sighting the *cortège* sprang towards it with the speed of a panther, crooked his elbows, and fired twice in swift succession.

At the second shot Mr. Garstin groaned and fell limply backward; Gwen, with a small shudder, leaned close against Finlay; and the answering shots of the escort rang sharply out. But the man had turned and sped like a lightning streak over the wall; and at a word from the Commissioner two Sowárs galloped off in pursuit.

Finlay, with his pulses beating anyhow from half a minute's rapture, hastened to investigate the damage done.

"Nothing serious, mercifully, sir," he reassured Rivers, whose face, grey to the lips, startled him more than the incident itself. "Hurts, of course; and it's bleeding a bit; but I think I can bandage it after a fashion."

The which he did, skilfully and tenderly, by means of four handkerchiefs; Mr. Garstin lying back, with closed eyes, groaning at intervals, and muttering inarticulate replies to his host's expressions of regret.

"How horrible!" Lyndsay whispered to Laurence as they drove on. "And it might have been Mr. Rivers—or Gwen."

"It might have been—you," Laurence answered with repressed vehemence, and could say no more.

"Why did he do it?" she persisted; and he smiled in spite of himself.

"Ask me something easier! It's the nature of the

beast. That was no Gházi, though. There's probably some queer tale behind. Hope they catch him and find out."

They were in the station by now; and at this point a high trap passed them, its occupant just visible in the dusk.

"Good-*night*, Mr. Laurence. *Good*-night, Mrs. Videlle!" an emphatic voice gave them greeting; and Lyndsay responded sweetly, while Laurence ground his teeth.

"Detestable woman!" was his comment as they passed on.

"She is rather detestable!" Lyndsay agreed, smiling. "And she doesn't like me. But I'm not sorry."

"You've no cause to be. Though sometimes it's safer to be liked by a woman of her type."

"Safer! That sounds melodramatic! If she hated me ever so, surely she could do me no harm."

For which statement Laurence had no answer, beyond a hope that she spoke truth.

He and Finlay crowned their golden day by staying to dinner. Mr. Rivers startled all, save his wife, by a sharp heart attack; but revived and reappeared; while the champion of the oppressed Pathan, though pale and chastened, betrayed ignoble bloodthirstiness of mood. Mrs. Rivers, in her sore anxiety, looked to Laurence and Finlay to "keep things going"; nor looked in vain; and never had she so coveted the latter for her Gwen's husband as on this eventful night.

Before they left, news came that the Pathan had been tracked down and taken, in the station itself, after shooting a sergeant through the head; and next morning when O'Gorman returned from the trial he brought the "queer tale" Laurence had anticipated.

"Seems that poor devil's had a hell of a time for the last three years," he said, flinging himself into a chair and shouting for a 'peg.' "Shot a *Mullah* in a fit of blind rage, and has led a dog's life ever since. Not a tribe among them all would give him shelter, do what he would. Buneyr, Swát, Mohmands, Zukka Kehls, the whole lot spurned him without mercy. Even the Afridis—casual villains though they are—dared not overlook such a crime. So, in despair, the poor chap came back here to expiate his offence, and regain the respect of his fellows by killing a Sahib and becoming a martyr. He'll be

hanged to-day under summary powers; and he's quite satisfied with the arrangement. His only comment was that if his body were burnt his expiation would be vain: and his story being genuine on the face of it, Mr. Rivers has granted his request for decent burial. But the cream of the whole thing is that the Honourable Member is quite huffy with the Commissioner for his 'reprehensible leniency towards the blood-thirsty scoundrel,' who scratched his sacred arm! The poor sergeant don't count, of course. He's food for powder! You bet this little affair will be old Garstin's stock anecdote at dinner-parties; and will modify his gilded theories on the Frontier question for life!"

## CHAPTER XIII.

Thou canst not stir a flower,
Without troubling a star.
—Francis Thompson.

Lyndsay Videlle's week of respite was over; a week neither she nor Laurence was likely to forget. Acutely sensitive to the atmosphere of those about her, Lyndsay had responded manifestly to her mental change of air. No morbid taint marred the wholesome sweetness of her nature. But for her, discord was the prince of evils; and now, to Carrie's antagonism had been added the clash between compassion and honesty evoked by her new relation to her husband; a relation that hurt her pride, her idealism and her natural desire to make others happy, which had been responsible for more than she guessed.

A week of close contact with a woman supremely versed in the difficult art of wifehood had intensified the hidden hurt, by a partial revealing of the one form of love warranted to outlast the shocks and buffetings, the long strain of marriage; a love that flows, like a great river, deep and tireless, through the secret places of the heart. Enough, at least, she divined to realize that such a burnt offering of personality was still, for her, a miracle, to be envied and admired; a miracle whereof she had learnt nothing from her own mother.

And enlightenment had gone further. For now, at last, she saw, in this marvel of self-effacing devotion, the supreme talent of her own nature; a talent seemingly doomed to die in the dark; since a great love demands, for cornerstone, a greater trust. She did not think thus in detail. Loyalty forbade. But vaguely she knew herself debarred from the best by the duplicity of the very man who craved it of her; a wrong which Lyndsay, the woman, and Lyndsay, the incurable idealist, found increasingly hard to forgive. For Videlle had spoken truth

about the "bit of adamant" in her. Gentle and sensitive as she was, her character rested upon rock; and for that very reason she had it in her to suffer as the invetebrate never can.

So the shadows had invaded her week of sunshine; and there had been sleepless nights when she had looked tragedy in the face, and known it for a dominant factor in her life. But the healthy soul and body of four and twenty are nothing if not resilient. Heart-to-heart talks with Monica Rivers, Gwen's infectious nonsense, and an undercurrent of mirth over the "Garstin episode" could not fail to disperse the shadows, if only for a time. And there were deeper sources of content in the progress of a friendship at once restful and stimulating; a friendship sealed and ratified by more frequent intercourse. For Laurence, secure in his resolve had drifted from the path of prudence into a new and delectable relation; while Lyndsay—the barriers of reserve once levelled—accepted his companionship as simply and gladly as the child she still was, in spirit, if not in years. There was about him a certain hill-top quality, a suggestion of clear spaces and breezy heights that contrasted sharply with the twilight crookedness and captiousness of her husband's temperament; and instinctively, without analysis or afterthought, she turned to him for refreshment, for a breath of mountain air. Once, when his coming had dispelled a cloud of harassing thoughts, it had seemed to her poetic fancy that the mere sight of him was like looking towards the sunrise.

Yet was she in no danger of falling from one calamity into another. Rather did the impossibility of Love's intrusion enhance her delight in this rare fellow being, with whom mind and spirit could expand as naturally as a flower in the sun. Her husband's insistent love-making since that unforgettable day, and her own inability to meet his need, had, for the moment made thought or speech of lover's love distasteful to her. As for possible danger to Laurence;—there her idealism stood in her light. Had it even occurred to her, she would have believed him incapable of it; and perhaps her belief lifted him higher than either dreamed.

But Monica Rivers was not thus deceived. Shrewdly

suspecting by now the state of Alan's heart, there were moments when her worldly wisdom resented Lyndsay's blindness though in truth she loved her the more for the unconquerable *naïveté*, that so strangely linked her cleverness with a rather beautiful, if almost irritating obtuseness to things pedestrian. Once or twice she had been tempted to speak. But always something in her shrank from spoiling a relation unsullied in thought as in word. It was hard on Mr. Laurence, of course. But he was old enough to take care of himself. As for those who make capital out of such things, she dismissed them with the old Scots formula: "They say? What say they? Let them say!"

And they said a good deal, in certain quarters. For Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr, always extreme to mark what was done amiss, had her own opinions on the case in point; and by no means kept them to herself. Speculations as to possible "developments" circulated freely between her and her chosen "chum," Stella Davison of the Monmouths, universally known as the Star of Destiny;—a delicate allusion to her fatal effect upon a regiment of bachelors, over which she reigned supreme. Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr admired and secretly envied her; and, in the hands of these two, poor Lyndsay's reputation fared as ill as might be expected. But such talk did not flourish in the neighbourhood of Mrs. Rivers; and no breath of it had blurred the brightness of Lyndsay's week.

Well—it was over now. To-day she was returning to her own shabby bungalow, refreshed in spirit, and—by reason of a hidden and wonderful certainty—revived in hope. For she knew now that the crown of marriage was hers; and to Lyndsay—woman and poet—it was as if she had touched one of the secrets of the Unseen, whence all life springs; as if her soul stood upon the threshold of a new Heaven and a new earth.

She smiled dreamily at her own face in the glass, as she stood before it pinning on her hat.

Videlle was not home yet. But she was going there now, to unpack, and to take an hour's rest, for the sake of the secret. Then she would drive to meet Jim; and—but for Carrie—it would be nice to have him back. So much, at least, honesty could admit. Possibly love would

strike deeper—now. She could not tell. Sometimes she almost hated the perversity of her own heart, that could not give greatly to order. But the inability remained.

A knock at the door heralded Mrs. Rivers. She came forward holding out her arms; and Lyndsay flew to her like a homing dove. "Oh, how can I thank you," she murmured, clinging to this friend of a few months as she had never clung to the mother that bore her.

The older woman held her close and long.

"Don't try, dear child," she said. "As for me, I hate letting you go even that little way. But you have your own niche to fill, Lyndsay; and I believe you're going to be very happy these next few months—in spite of Carrie."

"I think—I am," she said softly.

"I *know* you are," the other answered, and kissed her again.

So they parted, in the fulness of understanding that transcends speech; and Lyndsay drove homeward, resolved upon concord, even with Carrie, who sat alone in the drawing-room cherishing thoughts far removed from peace. "Gummy" supposed to be "at lessons" in a friend's bungalow, was gleaning knowledge, more congenial if less wholesome in the said friend's compound; and she herself had just sped the parting guest, summoned to save her from the affliction of her own society.

On the entrance of Jim's wife she rose, hostility in her whole aspect; and Lyndsay's high hopes went to pieces at touch of the soft fat hand that lay limply in her own.

Friendly words of greeting died on her lips; and it was Carrie who spoke, on an aggressive note of sarcasm.

"My gracious! This is *veree* remarkable! I thot you would stay till the last minute, and leave *me* to meet Jim."

Lyndsay frowned. "I am not in the habit of leaving my privileges to others" she said coldly. "I came over early to unpack, and rest a little before driving to the station."

"Oo yes, you would naturallee be tired after so much dissipation and such an *exhosting* journey! I hope you will be fit for thee drive!"

The hit was too palpable to be ignored.

"Carrie, where's the use of this incessant quarrelling? Surely—for Jim's sake, we might try to keep the peace."

At that Carrie's large chin went up, haughtily scornful.

"For Jim's sake, indeed! We can be mightee considerate of poor Jim, when it suits us! But we need not trouble ourselves to keep his name out of the mud. Oh, *dear*, no! And as for your fine friend, Mrs. Rivers, she ot to think shame of herself encouraging such disgraceful carryings on under her veree roof—!"

Lyndsay's set lips whitened.

"Let Mrs. Rivers alone, please," she said, ignoring the baser implication, with a Lyndsay-like blindness, wilful or otherwise. But Carrie, bent on enlightenment, pursued her course unabashed.

"It's oll veree well to put on airs, and spurn me like a serpent under your feet. But what will Jim say—that is thee point—when he hears of your behaviour in his absence; and of the prettee remarks about you and your Engineer admirer that are passing between Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr and her friend?"

"How do you know what passes between them? You don't belong to their world."

"No, indeed! Such she-dragons are not at *oll* to my taste. But there are always birds in the air to carree such things—" That a chance phrase, overheard at the Club, had ended in shameless eavesdropping was a detail she did not feel called upon to reveal. "And I can tell you that if Jim *is* a soft, he is mightee particular about his women-folk."

"You needn't interpret him for my benefit," Lyndsay answered with rising heat. "And please understand that you are to say nothing of this to him. I will not have him worried directly he comes home with pure inventions—"

"Inventions, indeed! That is a clever way to slip out of it! But after oll—" she shrugged her fat shoulders. "It would be useless to speak. He is such a love-sick fool about you. He would never believe; or say a word. And all the time you are taking mean advantages; encouraging other men's advances behind his back—"

"How dare you talk like that to me!" Lyndsay flashed out, a flame upon her visage; and as she turned to go,

Carrie saw that she had overshot the mark. Moreover she recognised a different quality between Lyndsay's anger and Jim's.

"Linsee—I did not mean—I am soree—" she stammered lamely. But Lyndsay swept on unheeding; and disappeared into her own room, bolting the door behind her.

The need for unpacking was forgotten. Disgust and anger dominated her;—the still, white anger of a great nature, greatly wronged. The hands that unpinned her hat shook pitifully; but the lips were steady, almost hard. Then she lay down, and pressing her intertwined fingers across her eyes, tried to unravel her chaotic emotions, to fathom the how and why of this cruel welcome home.

Relieved of Carrie's maddening presence, anger soon gave place to a vague bewilderment; a half frightened feeling, as of a child flung alone among strangers who spoke an unknown tongue. What could these women be made of, who hastened to impute evil where no evil was? And what could they possibly say? Did they accuse her, like Carrie, of "encouraging other men's advances"? What men? And what manner of advances? Lyndsay wondered blankly. Having been proffered nothing beyond the frank friendship of an upright gentleman, her obtuseness was in some measure justifiable.

As to "keeping Jim's name out of the mud"—at the memory of the words fire ran in her veins. Could she by any chance, have wronged him unwittingly—she, to whom he had given the great gift? It was inconceivable. Carrie was notoriously extravagant. But the fact remained that there had been talk for which she appeared to be responsible; talk of a kind that her husband was peculiarly quick to resent. Her very failure to meet his deepest need, or to conquer her distaste for the half-breed strain in him, made her the more fastidious in respect of the duty and allegiance that could at least be his in full measure; and she had been less than woman, had Carrie's sneer at his folly left her unmoved.

At length, out of her formless misery, one clear perception emerged. In some way her intimacy with Laurence cast a slur upon Jim and upon her own loyalty as a wife. If that were so,—if there were any likelihood

of their names being coupled as Mrs. Davison's was with Captain Smythe,—then, of course, she must see less of him in future. A stab of pain accompanied the resolve; for the man meant much to her; more than she was capable of guessing. But it is at such crises that those for whom duty is "a watchword in the blood," reap reward. They are spared the temptation to compromise, to dally with the forbidden thing, that embitters renunciation and undermines resolve.

So now, did habit save Lyndsay from the "ineffective, indeterminate swaying" of the half-hearted. Since the exigencies of marriage demanded this thing of her, it must be done—for Jim's sake. But she would not risk misunderstanding with Laurence—for his sake. If a surface modification of their friendship were essential, surely he had the right to know why; and there was something so chivalrous, so "safe" about his whole nature; and so innately did she rely on his ready understanding that she foresaw no difficulty in speaking. Nor did she perceive that what seemed to her simply just and natural was in truth the most delicate form of flattery that could well be offered to a man. Not that her perceptions were blunt; but that they were a shade too fine for the average complications of worldly life. And she was further handicapped by Vereker's training. For although man—as a striving aspiring fellow being was in some measure known to her, man—the concrete, complex social unit, still remained an uncharted country, seen vaguely through a golden mist.

As she had originally idealized her husband, so now did she idealize her friend; demanding the highest of him as a matter of course. In two days' time, she would meet him at Mrs. Rivers' "At Home," given in honour of the departing guest; and it would be easy to find an opportunity for speech.

Then, having more or less set her House of Life in order, she got up quietly, unpacked, and drove to the station to meet her husband.

## CHAPTER XIV.

O eyes on eyes,—
O voices, breaking still,
Against the watchful will,
Into a kinder kindness than seems due,
From you to me;—from me to you.
—HENLEY.

MONICA RIVERS was justly proud of her garden. The encompassing care no longer needed by her children had been transferred to the flowers that stood only second to them in her heart;—first, Gwen declared in her wicked moods. But this was libel.

She worked among them personally; proof of superlative devotion in India, where that tutelary genius of gardens, the *māli*, will undertake, for a modest monthly wage, to conjure flowers from his own domain or other people's, at all possible and impossible seasons of the year. But to your true gardener the plant is even dearer than the blossom; and by some mysterious sixth sense, it seems to understand this, and respond; as did Mrs. Rivers' chrysanthemums and roses, her asters and pansies, that glowed among green spaces of lawn and shrubbery in regal patches of purple and crimson and gold. Giant chrysanthemums in pots were massed round the poles of the great *shamiánah**—an outdoor drawing-room, gay with chairs and rugs and the long gleaming tea-table, where roses triumphed.

More chrysanthemums flanked the verandah steps; and here Mrs. Rivers, the hostess, stood smilingly shaking hands with half Peshawur, while Mrs. Rivers, the woman, hovered in spirit near a sofa in a darkened room, where her "man" lay white and exhausted after one of his sudden attacks, whose ominous character was recognised and seemingly ignored by both. Only by such silent

*Marquee.

denial can human souls go forward, unconquering yet unconquered, in the face of foreseen disaster. So these; and among all the guests "star-scattered on the grass," were few who suspected the truth; few who did not regard Mrs. Rivers as a woman unfairly favoured by the gods.

Finlay stood at her elbow, a self-appointed A. D. C.; to run errands or sweep the uncongenial from her path. On the central lawn groups and couples strolled, laughing and talking; and from a far corner the British infantry band broke brazenly into the "Boulanger March." Close by the *shamiánah* Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr and the magnetic Stella held a group of subalterns in thrall while they monopolised an air-gun and vied with each other in missing the bull's-eye; a feat accompanied by shrieks and vociferous applause.

Suddenly Mrs. Rivers' smile changed its quality, and she held out both hands.

"Ah, here you are, Lyndsay! Quite fashionably late!" Then in a lower tone: "And my dear, how lovely you look! Violets in your toque *and* in your eyes!"

Lyndsay flushed with pleasure. "It came yesterday. I thought you would like it."

"I do indeed! Isn't she charming to-day, Dr. Videlle?"

"Yes. It is exceedingly becoming," he assented stiffly as they passed on.

Yet the gown was simplicity's self. Colouring and the woman were all. A soft cloth, delicate in tint as a newly opened lilac bud; its delicacy enhanced by incidents of filmy lace and a bunch of violets at her breast. Her soft loose knot of hair was crowned with violets pale and dark. For it was a day of flower toques; and this one, designed in a happy moment, intensified the flower-like quality of the face beneath.

Lyndsay had fully enough of natural vanity to rejoice in the beauty and fitness of it all; and in the added self-confidence that comes with the knowledge of being faultlessly dressed. For her appointed task looked more formidable as she neared it. Viewed in the unclouded atmosphere of her own soul, it had seemed simple enough. But here, in the midst of the world that could so lightly think and speak evil, the minds of those about her seemed to become strangely, distractingly entangled with her

own; breeding self-consciousness, blurring her mental lucidity; and hampering simple, straightforward action.

The group round the target held her against her will. Were they so immaculate, those women, she wondered proudly, that they dared speak ill of her? The whole thing puzzled and angered her beyond measure.

Nor were matters improved by her husband's sudden change of mood. Yesterday he had been all tenderness and devotion; to-day she was conscious of repressed irritability, heralding storm. The one certain thing about the man was his uncertainty; and at times his wife despaired of ever reaching solid ground. But to-day there were reasons, unknown to her, in the shape of guarded hints let fall by Carrie when she was safely out of earshot; and his mood was the natural outcome of the clash between ever ready suspicions and a half worshipping love of the woman. So he walked beside her in silence; while she, catching sight of Laurence in a distant group of men, was wondering whether an opportunity would be given her, and if not, whether she would have courage to make it. Once alone with Laurence she knew that self-consciousness and complications would vanish like night shadows at dawn.

"Come and have some tea," Videlle said abruptly.

"Very well."

And they entered the *shamiánah*, Mrs. Rivers still watching them with troubled speculation in her eyes. There had been a pause in the stream of arrivals after their passing; and her own heartache by no means precluded preoccupation in the drama of common human life.

"Poor Mr. Laurence!" she said, thinking aloud, as she sometimes did when with Finlay. "I am afraid a violet-crowned, lilac-gowned Lyndsay will rather upset his equanimity. He is behaving so admirably that I hope no one is going to spoil matters by unwarrantable talk."

"Bound to," Finlay answered almost curtly. It was her first mention of the subject and he did not relish it. "Why else does an all-wise Providence permit the survival of Burkeley-Kurrs?"

"Solely to give you the pleasure of being satirical at their expense!" Her smile ended in a sigh. "They all

seem fairly happy now. Would you mind keeping an eye on things if I went in for half an hour?"

"Of course not. What earthly use am I otherwise? I wish the whole show could have been put off. Do go in to him; and leave the rest of 'em to me. Once get 'em firmly attached to the tea-table, they'll be happy enough. As for old Garstin, he's clearly in his element, playing hero of the hour, in that pathos-provoking sling —which he could have discarded three days ago; and dancing attendance on your daughter, whose patience seems almost equal to her father's."

"Blessed child! She is paying the price of her daughterly zeal. Perhaps you'll rescue her when I'm gone?"

"I doubt if she'd thank me," the man answered with a wry smile.

"It might be worth trying—on the chance!"

And with that she left him to watch the "puppet-show" from his coign of vantage. After all, why spoil the Honourable Member's last evening, when he really felt quite grateful to the "old chap" for proving how light-heartedly Everett could be set aside when Rivers was in question. And for himself, Gwen's company was becoming a joy too bitter-sweet to be indulged in with impunity.

How the girl would have blessed him just then for effecting a rescue, he could not be expected to guess. Not only was her patience wearing threadbare; but her spirit was overcast by her father's illness, whose serious nature she was not allowed to suspect. And, worse than all, an indefinable something in the man's manner checked the ready flow of talk that was natural to her as breathing.

By a series of laboured manœuvres he finally succeeded in luring her to a secluded corner of the garden, where a rough seat circled the trunk of a great *sirus;* and with no less laboured phrases enlarged on the charms of the spot; the relief of a few moments' respite from the "madding crowd." Whereat she could not choose but sit down.

"You haven't found India such a bad place, after all," she said lightly. "And I believe you'll be quite sorry to say good-bye to Peshawur, in spite of that wicked Pathan!"

"Most emphatically I shall be sorry; unless—I am privileged to carry away a hope—" he cleared his throat elaborately. "Possibly, you already guess—?"

Her puzzled frown assured him that she did no such thing; and he stumbled forward undismayed.

"Of course I am aware—that my speaking at all must appear—somewhat precipitate. But I am no green boy, who can afford to wait. And you yourself have been—so graciously encouraging—"

Whereat Gwen fairly gasped. "Stop—O please stop! I never thought—"

"Of course not, my dear young lady—" his finger-tips gently pressed her sleeve. "Now, however, I venture to hope that you will think—*seriously* of an offer—premature, yet sincere—an offer—"

"But I don't want to marry *anyone*, for ever so long," the girl cried desperately; her natural assurance shaken by the fact that the man was her father's contemporary and her father's guest.

Mr. Garstin, however, was not hypersensitive. It merely struck him that she needed time—and a fuller cognizance of facts.

"Very right and natural in the circumstances!" he commended her with the glib precision of utterance so maddening to her quicksilver temperament. "Nevertheless, I would ask you to consider that my—my feeling for you is no mere boyish infatuation; that as—*my* wife you would enjoy wealth, social position, a house in town if you so desired—"

But such flash-lights upon the future were altogether too much for Gwen. In despair of making herself clear, she sprang to her feet, her white forehead puckered with distress.

"Oh, please understand that it's no use talking. I don't want wealth, *or* position, or anything like that. And even if I did marry I should want—the man to serve in India—always—"

Mr. Garstin moistened his thin lips, and nervously shifted his *pince-nez*. It took him a few seconds to grasp the truth. Some fool of a soldier in the background, no doubt; but he had given the girl credit for more common-sense.

Then he too rose, without alacrity.

"You are amazingly direct, my dear, like all modern young women," he said in a chilled tone. "Young girls of *my* time—"

Footsteps and voices banished the said young girls, to Gwen's flagrant relief. With a low cry she turned to find Lyndsay and Laurence also in search of seclusion; and at sight of them distress evaporated.

"Oh Lyndsay, you delectable vision! I've been admiring you and longing to get at you. Please don't trouble to wait, Mr. Garstin. I want to speak to Lyndsay a minute; then I'm going in to father."

The hero of the hour, baulked at all points, bowed stiffly; and so passed out of that secluded corner—and out of the girl's life.

Gwen sank upon the seat with a broken sound between laughter and tears.

"Oh Lyn, you don't know what he's been saying!" she flushed and glanced at Laurence.

"Am I *de trop?*" he asked, twinkling.

"Of course not. You're one of the family! And you won't speak of this—not even to Captain Finlay please. But really—if one mayn't be decently polite to a Methuselah—!"

"Oh, come! That's a bit strong! I hope no one will call me a Methuselah when I'm turned fifty."

"Probably you won't *be* one so early. But *he is!*" She sighed and got upon her feet. "Oh, how men manage to spoil everything! And how troublesome it is to be a girl!"

"It is rather—a responsibility," Lyndsay agreed demurely. Whereat Gwen stooped and kissed her.

"You darling! So like you to find it a responsibility! I can't say I've ever felt responsible for men's vagaries, especially when they're older than father, who's worth all of them put together—including you!"

She curtsied to Laurence and left them; fluttering a white hand as she vanished from sight.

For a minute or two Lyndsay stood absorbed; and Laurence, watching her in a worshipful silence, realized afresh how aptly Shelley had voiced the essence of his heart's allegiance; his futile yet incurable aspiration.

"The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow:
A devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow."

"Something afar"—that was half the secret of her inexpressible charm. And as if divining his thought, she looked up at him with a smile of such clear confidence as brought her many degrees too near for his peace of mind.

"She *is* a dear. I love her. Shall we sit?"

He complied; and again there fell a short silence. Then: "I'm afraid something's troubling you?" Laurence said gently.

"Yes."

"Can *I* help?"

"Yes. If you will."

"Do you doubt that?"

She smiled thoughtfully at a distant flower-bed.

"If I did, we should not be here. But—it isn't easy to speak because it concerns—you and me."

The linked pronouns set him throbbing. "What's wrong with—you and me?"

"Nothing—nothing. It's only—" At thought of that group round the target anger routed shyness. "Oh, what *right* have women like Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr and Mrs. Davison to distort and disfigure beautiful things with their own crooked inventions?"

She did not look at him in speaking; but she saw the hand on his knee clenched till the big knuckles stood out sharp and white; and in the stifled sound that escaped him she recognised, with a thrill of satisfaction, an anger vehement as her own.

"You don't—mean to say—" he asked slowly, and could get no further.

"I mean that for the sake of—others, one can't treat that sort of vulgarity with the full contempt it deserves." This with a lift of the violet-crowned head. "And I'm afraid we must—see less of one another—than we have done just lately."

He drew a difficult breath; and she turned to him with an impulsive frankness, very rare in her.

"Oh, it's hateful having to speak of it at all! But it would have been unkind and unfair to leave you without

any clue to my actions. Besides—we need only lose the small change of friendship. You remember Emerson? 'The condition which high friendship demands is the ability to do without it.' Well, we must do without it—more or less. You *do* see that, don't you?"

Her eyes shone upon him, darkly luminous as the sky at night.

"Yes. I do see that," he said gravely; and her answering look was a benediction.

"I felt sure you would. But oh, I *wish* the need to speak had never arisen at all."

"I wish it too—from the bottom of my heart," he answered with smothered vehemence; and could not at once add more. For at that cry, wrung from the tenderness of her woman's soul, all the Laurence in him responded unshrinkingly to the "clear call of things high and hard" that comes to most men once in a life. And he had not been the son of his father had he shut his ears to it now. Instant action was imperative. But instant speech was difficult. The blood hammered at his temples. The distant flower-bed swam before his eyes. Then the mist cleared; and he bent towards her, elbows on knees, both hands clasping his stick.

"I want you to know that I shall never forget the honour you have done me to-day. As for me, I blame—bitterly, my own selfishness and carelessness that have given those worthless women the power to hurt you with their infernal lies. I—I *beg* your pardon—"

He bit his lip, reddening furiously. But her smile held manifest approval.

"Don't distress yourself. I find the adjective—rather appropriate! And don't blame yourself either. That hurts me more than anything people may say."

"Because you are far too kind. You always have been. And *this* is your reward. But at least I can save you from any further trouble by leaving the station at once and putting in the rest of my time down-country. I meant to go shooting anyhow, part of the time."

"Oh, but surely—not before Christmas? I never thought of anything—so drastic!"

At every turn her divine unconsciousness made things harder for him; and for each fresh burden laid on him he

loved her the more. Now he leaned an inch nearer; dallying with the temptation to stay.

"You think I need not go—really?"

"Well—I don't quite see why you must upset all your plans—because of those women—"

"No. You wouldn't. But unhappily, I do. I know too well the scope of their accomplishments. You have trusted me enough to be frank with me. Now you must go one further and trust me to mend matters in the only way I can."

"I do trust you—implicitly."

He thanked her with a long look that brought the blood into her cheeks. At sight of it he pulled himself together, and sat back, squaring his shoulders; a fighting gleam in his eyes. For in that moment of essential contact, he knew that he, of all men living, had power to rouse this woman as she had never yet been roused; that retreat, now, would be no cowardice, but the only line of action consonant with self-respect.

"I'll get my traps together and go down to Pindi to-morrow," he said abruptly, almost roughly, because he was defying that inner voice.

She started and turned.

"To-morrow?"

"Yes. Unpleasant things are best done at once."

"But—Captain Finlay—?"

"Oh, Julian's all right. I need only say that I hear Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr has been distinguishing herself and he'll applaud my decision. He warned me long ago. That's why I blame myself. All the same, it's detestable that a man and woman can't be good friends without setting all the geese in the station cackling."

Lyndsay sighed.

"We human beings have a genius for multiplying miseries," she said. "But, after all, this one will pass; and you are sure to be here again—some day."

"I hope so. But India's an uncertain country. I'm due in Kashmir by April; and I sha'n't be getting six months leave again in a hurry. That's why—"

He broke off; and she softly completed the sentence.

"That's why you might as well—come back for a week or so, before going North; and by then Mrs. Berkeley-

Kerr and her friends will have forgotten all about us!"

To Laurence it was as if a star shone out suddenly in the darkness ahead. He drew a long breath. "That's fixed up then. And, in the meantime—I may write?"

She hesitated, thinking of Carrie's prying eyes.

"I swear I won't take undue advantage of the privilege," he urged with the boyish eagerness that so well became him; and Carrie was banished forthwith.

"I'm sure of that. Please write. Letters from Gilgit will be thrilling! And now—we must go back."

"At once?"

"Well—a little longer. '*They*' won't notice." A sudden smile illumined her. "Really we're rather like two children over stolen apples!"

"And no fruit on earth can beat a stolen apple for sweetness!" Laurence declared stoutly. "Our first parents discovered that."

So by a natural transition they passed on to the happy effortless talk irradiated by gleams of sympathy and humour that is one of life's rarest ameliorations. And in the pure pleasure of it they forgot the parting ahead; forgot also the flight of time, till footsteps close at hand recalled them sharply to actualities, and brought Lyndsay to her feet.

"Oh, now we have stayed away too long!" she murmured and the faint tremour in her voice strained the man's self-mastery almost to breaking-point.

So, for the space of a few heart-beats they stood silent. Then Laurence held out his hand.

"I think—this must be good-bye," he said, his voice low and steady. "I'd sooner not come to the bungalow. And the supposition is—that I've gone off shooting on a sudden invitation. You understand?"

"Yes. And you understand that—all this makes no difference?

"I do. I am proud of it." Then she gave him her hand. "Good-bye—till March; and—God go with you."

For an instant her eyes rested in his—eyes that glistened like dew-drenched violets; for an instant her hand was crushed, rather then held; then, without speech, they went slowly back to the world, whose chatter—

spiteful and unfounded as it was—had just possibly saved them from themselves.

Mrs. Rivers once more at her post, spied them afar off and would have joined them, but that Videlle hurried forward surcharged with righteous wrath. At sight of his face Alan's blood boiled. It was as the nearing of two thunder-clouds from which a touch would strike fire; and Lyndsay, conscious of electricity, advanced to meet her husband.

"You want to go?" she asked sweetly.

"Of course I do. I'm sick to death of this tomfoolery. Where the deuce have you been hiding yourself?"

Laurence heard the roughness of words and tone, and clenched his hand.

"We only strolled round the garden. Let me say good-bye to Mrs. Rivers; and I'll come."

"All right. Don't stand chattering for half an hour."

She smiled a mute farewell at Laurence, who stood like one dazed, hearing nothing, seeing nothing but a small lilac-clad figure, crowned with flowers, beneath which surely lurked a crown of thorns.

More clearly than ever he recognised suppressed tragedy in her relations with the man for whom she had sacrificed him, and in a measure herself. More than ever he blamed his own blind absorption in her, which had clearly roused the Oriental spirit of jealousy and exclusiveness in her husband. That the inevitable "scene" foreshadowed by Videlle's greeting was of his own making, honesty could not deny. Yet he himself stood fettered, debarred from right or power to shield her from the consequences of his own act.

Grief and rage commingled seared his soul as with hot irons; and turning on his heel he went back to the seat under the *sirus* that had witnessed his supreme hour, walking slowly, heavily, like a man grown suddenly old.

## CHAPTER XV.

If you loved only what were worth your love,
Love were clear gain, and wholly well for you.
Make the low nature better by your throes!—
Give earth yourself: look up for gain above!
—BROWNING.

THERE is a silence that unites and a silence that divides, and it was the last that fell all too frequently between this fatally assorted husband and wife, for whom essential union seemed an achievement outside possibility.

Lyndsay's leave-taking had been brief enough even to satisfy Videlle; for in truth she had been thankful to escape the kindly scrutiny of her friend's eyes. And as the cart rolled out through the gateposts into the dusty road leading to cantonments, both were inevitably reminded of that fateful earlier evening, which had held in solution all the possibilities of the present hour.

But to-night Videlle's anger was more than mere injured irritability, more than a chaotic tempest of jealousy and suspicion. It had in it the fire of genuine passion; and at the core of it was pain. In defiance of his own nature, he had been fool enough to trust this one woman, to believe her immune from the common frailties of her kind; and it seemed that his folly had reaped its due reward. Rather should he have trusted Carrie's discernment; for Carrie, being neither blinded by her beauty, nor enthralled by her elusive charm, could see her as she was—no divinity after all, but just the eternal feminine, endued with the full share of vanity and inherent subtlety which every Oriental associates with the word. But if she calculated on making this sort of capital out of his folly, she would find herself mistaken. And, as usual, he resented and misinterpreted her silence; the more so because in his view her behaviour cried aloud for explanation and self defence. His natural inference was that

she could not or would not take shelter behind either; whereas she was simply tired, and not a little saddened by the unexpected turn of events.

The plain path of duty had proved harder than she could have believed; nor had she been prepared for instant loss of the friend, who in two short months, had become an abiding factor in her life. It was so like him, so very like him, she reflected tenderly; and of course he was right. But still—the bare necessity revived her indignation of two days earlier; and instinctively she deferred speech till emotion had subsided. Moreover what she had to say did not bear speaking of till they reached home. So she sat silent communing with her own soul.

Once or twice Videlle glanced at her keenly, impatiently; and her delicate beauty, set in the colour and fragrance of spring, did but add fuel to the fire and bitterness to the speech that could no longer be withheld.

"By God, Lyndsay," he said, his tone low and incisive, "you may sit there looking as innocent as the violets at your breast; but you're not one-half so simple as you'd have a confiding husband believe! I'm to trust you implicitly, am I? And the moment my back's turned you set the whole station chattering about you and that cursed fellow, whose little game I spotted from the first—"

The gentle pressure of her hand on his arm startled him.

"Hush, please hush! I'll explain—when we get home."

"Damn explanations! You can't slip out of facts—like this afternoon. But I'll have you remember in future that you're my wife; and I'm not the man to put up with little amusements of this kind. As for Laurence, I suppose it doesn't occur to your innocence—"

"Mr. Laurence and I understand each other!" she interposed hotly, her cheeks aflame.

"A long sight better than you and I do, it seems!"

Her lips quivered. "Oh, if you would only wait! You'll be sorry—afterwards."

"Sorry? Lyn—what do you mean?"

He pressed closer, till his arm touched hers. But she drew hastily away.

"Not here. Not here. Oh, *can't* you understand?"

The pain and pleading in her voice checked his anger while it pricked his curiosity. Sorry? What the deuce did she mean?

He lashed Trumpeter into a canter; and Lyndsay, sitting well away from him, grasped the iron rail of the cart; while the *sais*, bobbing perilously on the tail-board, muttered impolite epithets between the bumps; and cursed in untranslatable language the vagaries of this 'too-much-angry' Sahib, whose intrinsic right to the title he privately denied. For no 'prejudiced' Anglo-Indian can excel your thorough-bred native in readiness to detect and scorn the least suspicion of mixed blood in one of the ruling race.

All save Trumpeter—who rather enjoyed the change—were thankful when the bungalow was reached

"Come to the study," Lyndsay said quietly; and Videlle followed, his mind divided between anger and admiration at her gentle yet assured mastery of the position.

She went straight to the fireplace and drawing off her gloves held her chilled hands to the blaze.

"Now," Videlle said, brusquely, as he closed the door. "Perhaps you'll condescend to sit down and explain yourself."

For answer, she turned on him, her head held high.

"I want to know first, please, who gave you the impression that I had set the whole station chattering. Was it Carrie?"

"Well, if it was—that's beside the mark. It's the fact that matters."

"Exactly; and you ought to know by this time the value of Carrie's facts. In this instance the 'whole station' simply means Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr and her set. Carrie attacked me the minute I came home with her own version of their remarks; the sort of thing that to me seems quite unworthy of notice. But as I was afraid it might vex you, I begged her not to speak of it—which I might have known was useless; and this afternoon—I took steps that I hope will put an end to it—for good."

"Put an *end* to it!" Videlle echoed in amaze. "D'you take me for a fool? If you had said—to verify it—"

He broke off short, as she swept past him, her breast

heaving, her soft eyes flashing fire. The man had never seen her look more beautiful.

"As you are still too angry to give me a just hearing my explanation had better wait."

The quiver in her low voice caught at his heart.

"Wait? You stand there looking lovelier than the dawn and expect a man to wait?" He came close to her and imprisoning her cold hands drew her back to the fire. "No, Lyn, you don't leave this room till we get square. But I want the straight truth without any more preliminaries."

Her smile was sadder than tears.

"Have you never heard that 'it takes two to speak truth; one to speak and the other hear?' With a heart full of anger and suspicion, you would not believe the truth if an angel came from heaven to speak it."

"I'd believe *you* sooner than a battalion of angels," he answered very low. "You shall have your just hearing, little wife. Only for God's sake gave me the chance to prove it."

At that she withdrew her hands, and seating herself on the fender-stool, told her story, with a young simplicity and directness that compelled conviction; a story the man would scarce have credited from other lips than her own.

Her decision in regard to Laurence astounded him.

"Great Scot! You must have a mighty high opinion of the man!" he broke out in an uncontrollable flash of jealousy.

"I have," she answered quietly. "Not without good reason."

And Videlle as he listened, in deepening wonderment to the outcome of that talk under the *sirus* must needs acquiesce, grudgingly enough. His meaner self argued that no doubt "the fellow" was bored with station life after the wilds, and not sorry for an excuse to go off shooting. But his departure on any pretext was clear gain; and so enough of a distasteful subject. For after all, Lyndsay was the Alpha and Omega of his thoughts; Lyndsay, who for all her delicate reticence had not hesitated to take the initiative, or to forego the society of a man she clearly admired—for his sake. To Videlle it seemed that such superlative disregard of self could

be the fruit of one seed only. It was not in him to conceive that such abstractions as loyalty and uprightness could vitally affect the conduct of any woman—even such an one as Lyndsay.

For them, love was and always would be the supreme motive power of action. And despite certain uncomfortably ethereal qualities, his Lyndsay was very woman. In every word she uttered he read an indirect avowal of the thing he craved; and as conviction grew in him the lesser passion of jealous anger was merged in the greater passion that demands as right the triune gift of body, heart, and spirit, and will never rest satisfied with less.

But he possessed himself till the pause that told him all had been said. Then, in the fullness of certainty, he stooped and gathered her up into his arms, crushing the violets at her breast, kissing her vehemently again and again.

"Lyndsay, my Lyndsay! I understand now," he assured her between two kisses; and she knew for the hundredth time that he did not understand, nor ever would; that her act of simple duty had not only banished her friend, but had entangled her in fresh hypocrisies. For to enlighten him at such a moment were a cruelty whereof she was incapable; and, happily for her, that which she still had to tell him intensified the genuine desire to give all she could, a desire that was leading her, step by step, along a path she had deemed too steep and stony for climbing eight weeks ago.

But although response was no longer impossible, the sensitive soul of her suffered, and must always suffer in the vain effort to wring harmony from intrinsic discord, to blend natures sundered by racial instincts and ideals antipodal as the Poles; no less than by the innate delicacy and restraint of high breeding in the woman, and the fatal lack of it in the man.

"Jim—Jim, one moment, please," she urged at length, freeing herself, with gentle decision, and standing before him flushed and tremulous. "I haven't yet told you—everything."

He started and scrutinized her keenly.

"What is it now?" he asked, sharp anxiety in his tone; and she laid a light, reassuring hand upon him.

"Dear—don't look like that. Am I so apt to tell you unpleasant things?"

"No—no. Only—I was afraid it might be something that would spoil it all.'"

She smiled and shook her head. "Quite the reverse, something—that I hope—may crown it all."

The eloquence of her whole radiant face enlightened him; and he who had so often jarred her by speech, when all her finer sensibilities shrank from it, received the supreme revelation—supremest of all for an Asiatic—without spoken comment. Only his eyes answered hers. But he drew her close again—tenderly, reverently; and his kiss on her forehead, with its new quality of homage, stirred the deep waters of her soul as his unrestrained ardours had never done.

For an instant, she rested all her light weight on him, and Videlle's cup of triumph overflowed.

"Darling," he murmured, his lips close to her hair. "I've satisfied you—at last?"

"Yes—yes. But please—for the present, Carrie is not to know."

"Of course not. Perhaps—" he hesitated, revolving possibilities. "Perhaps, for a time, you'd prefer to be alone—with me?"

"Naturally. But you can't tell her so. And she wouldn't go if you did."

He tightened his hold.

"There are ways and ways of doing things, Lyn. I might arrange for an invite she wouldn't be likely to refuse. I'll see about it to-morrow. You've put up with her and her precocious brat, like the angel that you are; and I won't have them bothering and upsetting you—*now*."

Had she realized how typically Asiatic was his change of attitude,—his respect, bordering on worship, for Woman, the Life-Bringer, the mother of men,—the knowledge might possibly have checked her impulse towards closer union. But she saw it as a welcome, unlooked-for trait in the man himself, a link elemental and abiding between their alien souls; and for the first time in her knowledge of him, she lifted her lips to his.

END OF BOOK 1.

# BOOK II.

## THE STRENGTH OF THE HILLS.

## CHAPTER XVI.

> Go forth; and if it be o'er stony way
> Old Joy can lend what newer grief must borrow;
> And it was sweet, and that was yesterday,
> And sweet is sweet, tho' purchased with sorrow.
> —F. Thompson.

The first week of April found Alan Laurence back in Kashmir. He had left it six months earlier, filled with high-hearted anticipation; a boy in spirit, if a man in years. He returned to it a man full grown, scarred, and chastened, yet conscious of a secret exaltation, unimagined before the wings of his soul had been singed at the fire of the stars.

His fortnight in Peshawur had been a procession of beatific days, unsullied by comment from the "long-necked geese of the world," who were happily absorbed in matters of greater moment. Mrs. Berkeley-Kerr had been staying at Lahore, *en route* for Bombay and a summer at home; leaving the insatiable Stella engrossed in the delights of annexing and "educating" her two latest fledglings, by a policy of masterly inactivity all her own. To Alan's undisguised satisfaction Mrs. Vansittart also had been away: Videlle had ceased from scowling, and on two occasions had even invited himself and Finlay to dinner: while Lyndsay—most Lyndsay-like—had devoted those fourteen days to rewarding him, in her own inimitable fashion, for his prompt and chivalrous response to her appeal. As for Laurence he had relinquished himself to the "everlasting Now, the centre of all life and experience"; had learnt by heart every detail of her beauty; and had discovered during the process that it had less affinity with the obvious loveliness of earth, than with the indwelling loveliness of sky and sea. It was not merely her features that were beautiful, it was herself; and the subtlety of the distinction detracts nothing from its

truth. In the intervals of making these enchanting discoveries, he had enjoyed long talks with Finlay, who cherished hopes of following on in the event of "a row"; and at the end of two weeks there had been silent hand-grips, promises to write, and he had turned his face Northward with a heart wrenched between triumph and despair.

Mechanically, like a man in a dream, he had traversed the familiar route: Pindi, Murree, days in loquacious tongas, nights in rest houses by the way; and at the last, the natural gateway of rock that leads into the heart of enchantment:—a two-fold enchantment of season and place. For by now the sleeping Valley was astir with pulsings and throbbings of new life. In the meadows a blue mist of iris buds; in the orchards black boughs powdered with living snow; high overhead the jubilant Te Deum of awakened larks. And in the man's soul and body were secret stirrings also: the piercing sweetness of "Spring's light reiterate and reverberate word," that ran like ethereal fire through his veins; the unconquerable impulse and yearning, foredoomed to return unto him void. But mercifully for Laurence, work, practical and unromantic, claimed instant attention, and left him small leisure for dallying with the poetry and passion of the Spring. Already the spirit of his father was resurgent in his blood. Already the great game he had deserted and half forgotten beckoned to him from afar. A passionate impossible love had crippled his life. But surely, in the hills, in the stimulant of incessant work, the ache of desire would pass, the lost buoyancy of youth return.

An urgent letter from Lenox exhorted him to be back in Gilgit at the earliest possible date, bringing with him as many coolie-loads of stores, grain and ammunition as circumstance would permit. Lenox wrote, as usual, without anxiety; but the raw facts, bluntly stated, were not reassuring. The inevitable spring scarcity had begun exceptionally early. Incorrect figures and extensive peculation in the grain stores, revealed a deficit of a hundred and forty tons. "Pleasant!" was the Scot's terse comment on the news: and the cheerful tale went on. In spite of vegetable seeds from India and his own private mania for local cultivation the winter supply

of green food and salt had been inadequate. The troops were suffering seriously from scurvy, and from the want of new boots! From every direction came renewed rumours of trouble; restlessness across the Border, intrigue and bickerings within it. By way of culmination the postal and transport arrangements seemed on the verge of collapse; and Lenox, in addition to his manifold duties, was busy drawing up a practical scheme for their amendment. In the meantime he adjured Laurence to put the fear of God into supine contractors; to spare no pains in pursuit of the elusive coolie, and above all to "report himself at headquarters without delay."

Now a man might as well attempt to scale the skies as to work against time in Kashmir. Within that charmed circle of infinite leisure, Time is not. But Laurence, for love of his chief and for his own great need to stifle haunting thoughts, roused himself to superhuman exertion. He wrestled with the coolie problem and prevailed; dealt faithfully with suave and innocently injured contractors; and finally, in a dawn of grey and silver and lightly drifting mist, he set out, determined to achieve the eighteen days' march in twelve; glad, in spite of all, to be returning to those backwoods of the world, where the real work of man goes forward with sweat of brow and blistered hands, with action and endurance in place of speculation and talk.

Up, steadily up, out of the misty valley, where tall poplars struck a note of aspiration; where lake, rice-field and river gleamed like polished steel. Up through budding copses of wild rose and jasmin; through the great pine forest carpeted with wild flowers half-awake; across the wind-swept summit of Tragbál, and down again into the enchanted valley of Gurais, where the earth had already donned her jewels of forget-me-not and gentian, and the thickets were a-blush with the first wild roses of the year. By stages so alluring do men enter upon the rigours of the Gilgit Road:—a road whose record from the beginning of days has been a record of tyranny and forced labour; of havoc wrought by avalanche, flood, and famine, and of man's incredible brutality to man.

But the nullahs leading up to the Burzil Pass gave Laurence and his party a foretaste of its quality. No

ecstasy here of mating birds and blossoming sod; but a monochrome of rock and snow under a wandering tumult of cloud; and for bird-music the insistent "Allah, Allah" of coolies, groaning and staggering beneath their loads. Here and there a ghostly group of birches swayed shudderingly under the lash of the wind; and half-way up a savage snowstorm sprang upon them, an onslaught of stinging blinding flakes that roused the coolies to open rebellion. The line of march was disorganized; burdens flung down; and the chorus of lamentation resolved itself into one refrain: "It is Kismet. We go no higher. We be slaves of the Sirkar. But we will die here. It is less trouble than dying on the top." Whereat Nawaz Khan, Alan's right-hand man, cursed them and their ancestors in the choicest flowers of the vernacular; bidding them take up the loads again without further *tamasha* or he himself would show them a short cut to *Jehannum!** He looked quite capable of fulfilling his threat; and the loads were resumed, only to be flung down again three miles on, and again reinstated by the formidable Punjabi. Little interludes of this kind, repeated *ad nauseum* did not facilitate progress; and Laurence striding well ahead, with Vixen's fairy form nestling inside his *poshteen*,† cursed in equal measure the ineptitude of the Kashmiri and the treacherous vagaries of the Burzil Pass.

Nightfall found them on the summit, too hungry to eat, too cold and tired to sleep. A hut of piled stones, thatched with birch, proffered shelter from snow if not from wind. Within, round a sullen fire, crouched a party of Pathans going to work on the military road, and three or four *dák*-runners,—humblest, yet most indispensable units of Empire; doomed to traverse the hated Gilgit track in all seasons and weathers; handing on the sacred mail bags from man to man; forced at times to spend days and even weeks at the foot of blocked passes, waiting for an auspicious moment to push forward, the penalty of miscalculation being death. These were relating, with true Oriental phlegm, the discovery of two dead bodies on the way up, when the arrival of living travellers dispelled even casual interest in the dead.

Laurence, drenched and chilled into a travesty of his

* Hell. † Sheepskin coat.

cheerful self, questioned them anxiously as to promise of the morrow. They assured him that according to the *dastúr** of the Pass the sky would clear before dawn. And it was so:—even Burzil, the capricious, being apparently subject to the arch-tyrant of the East.

After a night of comfortless sleep, Laurence awoke in the first pallor of morning to find stars flashing low and clear, faintly irradiating a world devoid of colour, movement, sound. All things favoured an immediate start. But in slipping out of his sheepskin bag a shifting shadow, where all was motionless, caught his eye; a shadow that dwindled and expanded at irregular intervals as it drew near.

"What the devil is it?" he wondered, vaguely interested. "Come on, Vic! Let's explore." And in the colossal stillness three shadows converged.

Suddenly Laurence halted. "Great Scott, it's a woman!" he muttered in amaze. And a woman it was; crazed with anguish, half dead with hunger and cold, scraping frantically in the snow with fingers long since frozen to the bone. For an instant she confronted Laurence,—dishevelled, dazed; then, with a heart-piercing wail, fell to beating her breasts in orthodox lamentation.

"Hai, hai, my son! Light of my heart! The mountain hath taken him. . . . O my son. . . . my son!"

She stumbled forward, and would have fallen, but for Alan's supporting arm. Then she suffered him to lead her back to the camp, where food and fire and kindly questioning elicited her story.

The beginnings of the storm had caught them just beyond the Pass,—her and her man, a road contractor in charge of coolies. The child, being frolicsome, had strayed from the path; and while she sought him the contractor and his men had hurried on to the nearest shelter. She related the fact without rancour; accepting their conduct as a matter of course. What would you have? She was a woman: and women are cheap. But Laurence,—his native chivalry deepened to a cult by the love that dominated him,—promised himself a private interview with that contractor later on. He even delayed starting in order to prolong the fruitless search: while

*Custom.

Newaz Khan, respectfully remonstrant, wondered what new-fangled form of madness had entered into the Sahib. Finally, supported on a baggage pony, the distraught mother submitted to the inevitable, still beating her breast and calling upon the unheeding hills to give her back the light of her heart.

Once clear of the Burzil, the valleys of Astor and Indus claimed them, and they left winter behind for good. The mountains took on rougher, nobler, outlines; storm-shattered giants, their ribs bent into frowning brows, loomed above rocky *débris* and moraine where young leaves of birch and willow flashed out like smiles upon a rugged face; and the torrent leapt and shouted its way southward from gate-posts of granite through which it leaves the valley of Astor. Here the hills closed in abruptly; their summits veiled in mist; their scarred precipices redeemed from savagery by gleams of green in every crevice and on every ledge. In close fellowship with the river, the little file of men wound, snake-like, through the gloom of the narrows and out again into a new world, filled with gossamer vapours that transformed the upward-sweeping mountains into ethereal apparitions, out of touch with earth. And lo, at the far end of the valley, like a great white throne set in heaven, the peaks and buttresses of Nanga Purbat,—astounding, sublime; a vision Laurence could never behold without a catch of the breath and an uplift of the heart.

"How she would delight in it all!" was his inevitable thought. "I'll do what I can." And unslinging his camera he captured the Titan, to enclose in his first letter from Gilgit: then, with a heart strangely lightened, pushed on toward Astor.

Thanks to his zest for double marching he had covered a hundred and twenty miles within a week; and the seventh day found him across the river, riding leisurely through the haze of late afternoon: heart and brain over-awed by the majesty and simplicity of the eternal hills; by a sense of incredible remoteness from "the unprofitable stir and fever of the world." But, of a sudden, frenzied shouts of men, squealing and throbbing of native instruments, reminded him that he was nearing a centre of civilization, as it obtains in the Hindu Kush.

High aloft, crowning eight hundred feet of rock, stood the fort and town of Astor—a crazy old fort, with its three brass guns "for salaaming"; and a town of mud hovels set among rocks and boulders and the slender upspringing poplars, reminiscent of Kashmir. The shouts and music came from a lower terrace where the inevitable polo match went furiously forward: a battle royal, ten a side; pace and horsemanship undeniable; the whole mob, players and audience alike, shouting, cheering, gesticulating, while three drums and a pipe vied lustily with the clamour of human throats. On a higher terrace, requisitioned as parade ground, a Pathan of the Gilgit Body-guard was knocking the rudiments of soldiering into a Company of Imperial Service Troops. The sharp English words of command, ringing through the still air, had a friendly sound recalling Peshawur barracks; prophesying also a sumptuous dinner and two hours' "shop" with Jock Barton—alias the "Bull-pup"—who spent most of his days at Astor wrestling with raw troops, transport and road contractors.

Leaving Nawaz Khan to set up camp, Laurence followed the rough path up the cliff into the town. An insane hope, foredoomed to disappointment, drove him straight to the Post Office—a rabbit warren of mud rooms and verandahs, peppered all over with prints from Home journals. For the Babu cherished literary aspirations and palpably enjoyed airing his English. Here, by a happy chance, Laurence lighted on his errant road contractor, sleek and self-complacent, recounting his adventures on the Burzil Pass. Dates coincided, and Laurence, joining the group, charged him, in no measured terms, with the desertion of his wife and child. He assented; nothing perturbed. The loss of his son was admitted to be a grave misfortune; but contrition was far from him. The pious scoundrel opined that it was the will of God; and as for "the zenana," she was of little account, being already old. Whereat Laurence, the hot-headed, gave place to wrath and scathing comment, which left the Asiatic puzzled but unmoved.

"Come to my camp to-morrow," was his final word. "She's there all safe; though, by God! you don't deserve to get her back."

The man shrugged resignedly. One could not contradict a Sahib from Gilgit.

"Better had it been the boy," he muttered unabashed. "Nevertheless, a woman is always of use, even when old."

The philosophic reflection fell on more understanding ears; for the Englishman was already off in search of Jock Barton, a stolid chunk of a man, whom he would never have sought out in Peshawur; but in the wilds there are moments when mere identity of colour and language suffice.

Laurence talked half the night and slept late; but by noon he was enjoying rest and a light meal under a giant walnut ten miles off, having accomplished half the severe day's journey to Doián. Only another sixty miles lay before him—the roughest between Gilgit and Kashmir; but with luck, and the gentle stimulant of *backshish*, he might get his coolies to cover them in four days. It would please the Colonel; and for Alan, pleasing the Colonel was a satisfaction only second to pleasing the one woman on earth.

Three hours' rest for the men, and he was off again, breasting the steeps of Hatú Pir, the formidable ten-thousand-foot ridge that divides the valleys of Indus and Astor. Here the path degenerated to a track half obliterated by *débris* and incessant showers of stones. But at least it led up from the sandy desolation of the river bed, through the stateliest of pine forests, to a spur commanding such an amphitheatre of the greater gods, "all sunset-flushed," as made noble amends for the rigours of the climb —to the Englishman, if not to the coolies, who fell asleep lamenting the inhuman energy of Sahibs in general, and of *lál-bál-wal-lah** Sahibs in particular.

That same energy embarked them, long before dawn, upon the dread march to Ramghát,—a sheer drop down six thousand feet of tumbled rock, shingle, and sand to the barren gorge through which the Astor swirls like a mad thing, crested with foam: a march that concentrated into five miles all the worst evils of a road cursed by Kashmiris as a death trap, whence a man returned if his Kismet were good. Not otherwise.

But before the descent, the summit——! And, from

* Red-haired.

the summit, a panorama, vast, mysterious, sublime: the pale sky trembling into blue; the massed mountains, newly stepped out of the night, translated by the heavenly alchemy of dawn to insubstantial visions of a dream. East and west the great main ranges towered above the Indus. Southward Nanga Purbat reared his leagues of snow; and in the utmost North, beyond the veiled heights of Nagar, Rákápushi lifted a silver spear. Below, astonishingly far below, the gigantic valley of the Indus lay revealed—bleached and barren as the desert, walled in by rocks and precipices naked as truth. And here also the white magic of morning was at work. Its rays striking through fine veils of mist imbued the elemental rocks with every shade of purple and gray; while in the midst of this stupendous setting the river showed like a twisted strip of sea-water flecked with foam.

The influences of the place and the hour laid ghostly hands on Laurence, luring him to linger till the voices of coolies dwindled and died; till in all the vast sweep of the horizon was neither stir nor sound of life. For a brief, unforgettable half hour he stood alone amid the immensities, while the high hills and higher heavens declared the glory of God, "with visibleness," to the strengthening and uplifting of one solitary human soul. And because the soul of Alan Laurence owed its conscious life to a passionate impulse of the heart, the love that had been his baptism of fire had its due share in this his baptism of strength. The majesty and oppression of the mountains he had known aforetime; but their unspeakable benediction of peace and power,—never till now. And the revelation was none the less divine because it had reached him through the medium of a woman's voice and eyes.

As he turned away, Hope that had long lain dead in him, fluttered a wounded wing.

But the descent to Ramghat is admirably adapted to fracture tougher materials than hopes and visions—a truth tragically attested by the bones of men and animals strewn broadcast over that appalling incline. Laurence spent the next three hours in clambering down rocky steps, one or two feet deep, plunging over slopes of loose shingle and sand; holding on by his eyelids along a six-inch shelf hacked out of sheer cliff; and reaching the river,

not a little leg weary, he crowned all by riding the Kabuli over a single-span plank bridge, full fifty feet above the deafening torrent.

The state of the track gave him food for practical thought during his lonely camp dinner. "Shouldn't wonder if I'm better acquainted with Hatú Pir before the year's out," he concluded ruefully as he fell asleep.

And all next day he rode at ease through the "sunburnt and sorrowful valley" of the Indus, a colossal waste of stone and sand, walled in with leagues of rock and cliff whose immensity appals rather than appeals; a valley where Nature works her will unhindered and unhelped by man, where the words depth and height and distance attain a new significance, incredible to those who have not seen. And so, on through a narrow nullah to the welcome oasis of Bunji, where he crossed the Indus on a raft buoyed up by inflated bullock skins; a unique sensation, this last.

Only thirty miles now! Thought of the Agency bungalow, its homelike surroundings, its friendly folk within, spurred him on. Two more days of rocky wilderness and ravines; then, at long last, towards evening, a canter across the familiar plateau of Jutiál, the delight of made roads under foot, white glimmer of orchards, green of sprouting corn, and in the midst of them, two miles on, the round towers of Gilgit Fort. Clear air and sunshine cast a wonderful blue glamour over the hills; and filled the valleys with purple shadow. Whiffs of wild rose and scented broom gave him delicate greeting. The man's pulses quickened, and he patted the Kabuli's shoulder.

"Hie, on, Lollo. One more good spurt takes us there."

One more spurt past the Fort, through orchard and mulberry grove, till the Agency garden came in sight. A maze of pink and white blossom half obscured the house and beneath the fruit trees a man and a woman moved slowly, deep in talk. Suddenly they stood still; and Quita looked up at her husband, a hand on his arm, her characteristic profile silhouetted against the light beyond. As instinctively as on that far-off October morning, Alan checked his pony, and the whole scene flashed back upon his brain; the greeting between husband

and wife that had seemed to strike a new chord in his being, and his own young day dream, so cruelly fulfilled. The swift revulsion of feeling brought stinging tears to his eyes. But he brushed them angrily aside; cursed his idiotic sensibility, and dismounting, went briskly forward, the pony's bridle over his arm.

Quita heard him first and swung round sharply.

"Why, Eldred—it's Mr. Laurence!" she cried, and in three strides Lenox reached him, and grasped his hand.

"Well played, Alan, old chap! I didn't expect you till Thursday. Road flourishing?"

"After a fashion. Plenty of fresh stuff down from above! Hatú Pir was a nightmare."

"You shall go back later and doctor him up! How are you? Had the 'thundering good time' you coveted?"

"Yes thanks, sir—on the whole."

The tone was not convincing; and Lenox regarded him with narrowed eyes. "I'm glad of that," he said; and Quita, instinctively, changed the subject.

"Here's your *sais*, Mr. Laurence. And as I know you're both pining to talk shop I'll go and dress for dinner. Please don't forget that there *is* such a meal!"

When they were alone, Lenox looked squarely at the younger man. "It's first rate getting you back, Alan," said he. "And there's work enough for three of you waiting to be done. You look splendidly fit. Game for anything?"

"Anything in Heaven or earth, Colonel; or Hell either —if that 's part of the programme!"

Lenox smiled approval.

"I'm afraid it is! The military road people are doing pretty well. But it's deuced slow work; and I must have a mule track of sorts over Hatú Pir before autumn. A devil of a job; and you're the very man for it. But the first move's out to your old diggings beyond Nomál. You shall have a three day's breather; and after that, all the spare men I can muster. In the meantime come along and have a drink."

It was a cheery party of five that sat down together half an hour later; and neither dinner nor diners suggested an isolated colony buried alive in the uttermost hills. Two other officers completed the household: Jack Travers,

Political Assistant, known as "The Brat"; a dapper little man, whose red-brown face twinkled all over with the fun of merely being alive; and Wylie, the Agency Doctor, tall, and grave, with eyes that had an awkward knack of plumbing the deeps of you and finding the real man there. As for Laurence, Quita constituted him guest of the evening; sat by him, sang to him, and devoted herself to him generally. Travers challenged him to a duet on the banjo; Wylie, who, in this case, found the real man very much to his taste, sat watching him contentedly through a mist of smoke, and Lenox kept him talking till midnight.

A welcome typical of the country, and Alan Laurence was not the man to receive it unmoved. But because human nature is perverse in the grain, his last thought was an aching realization of the five hundred miles that stretched their interminable length between him and a shabby bungalow near the Peshawur hospital.

## CHAPTER XVII.

Steel true and blade straight
The great Artificer
Made my mate.
—R. L. S.

THREE winged days of rest, refreshment and stimulating companionship—and Alan, with Vic and the Kabuli, took the road once more. Quita, who had made friends with all three, commanded their reappearance on Saturday evening.

"And on Sunday," she decreed, "you shall forget roads and rocks, and make pictures with me instead!" Already he was her pupil and ardent admirer. "Bring back some sketches with notes of the colouring," she cried after him as he went. Then turning to her husband, who stood beside her: "He's the dearest fellow I've met this long while; and it's downright cruelty turning him out of this Paradise, to hack at cliffs in that terrible defile where there's not a whisper of Spring to cheer him."

Lenox had an understanding smile for her solicitude. "Possibly not. But you mustn't talk heresy to the man at the wheel! Alan's got his work cut out here, like the rest of us, and he'd be the last to grumble at its conditions. If the world were full of artists and rebels, like you, this sort of business would never get done at all! And I can't have you demoralizing my right-hand man. He's just the sort you would demoralize. Doesn't he remind you of Dick?"

"Yes. I wondered if you saw it. He's cleverer though. Bigger in every way."

Lenox nodded. "He's a first rate fellow. But I'm afraid you won't see much of him." His hand pressed her shoulder. "Having prevailed upon me to bring you into the wilds, you must content yourself, more or less, with my company!"

"*Mon Dieu*, what a hardship!" Her eyes caressed

his rugged face and figure: the woman delighting in the man; the artist appraising the fitness of his chosen setting. "Here comes Shaitán Secundus to carry you off. It's not much of your company I can get even here! Don't spend the *whole* day careering over the district. You promised me a ride this evening remember."

"Well, you shall have it!"

They clasped hands and parted. Quita went singing into the house, the light wine of Spring asparkle in her veins; while Lenox rode thoughtfully away under the bridal veil of the orchards, his brain peopled with problems, anxieties, and rumours of all sizes and complexions!

It was the chronic condition of life in Gilgit. The clean air of the hills seemed impregnated with microbes of intrigue, and the path of the Political was obscured by a tangled mesh of lies, with here and there a thread of truth to make confusion worse confounded. Each month of his sojourn in this, the focal valley of the Hindu Kush, had revealed more clearly to Lenox the magnitude and complexity of the task set before him; and the revelation had but stimulated his power and zeal to cope with it in all its bearings. For Eldred Lenox, though late in finding his niche, was a born Political, as a man need be who aspires to success in the most varied and responsible service that India has to offer; and in two years he had learnt and accomplished much. First and foremost he had discovered that, in an atmosphere of corruption, truth is the one unfailing talisman. It may astound and bewilder; it may not be believed; but ultimately its triumph will be proven by an imperishable influence founded on a rock. He had discovered also that—besides the heavy responsibilities attaching to a share in the complicated game of Frontier politics, and the diplomatic handling of a dozen Native States—he was practically answerable for internal administration as well; for the discipline and condition of the troops no less than for the harassing grain and transport problem; and this notwithstanding the fact that local authority was nominally represented by two Kashmir Officials—a Governor, and a General in restricted command of the troops. To keep on friendly terms with these figure-heads of power, and in their name to carry out his own

cherished schemes of reform was a task demanding all that a man had of patience, diplomacy, and bedrock strength of character. And it is in just such unobtrusive, critical work that the scantly appreciated British Officer—who is better at doing things than at discussing them—has proved his mettle up to the hilt, even as Lenox was now proving his own; shirking no responsibility that came his way, nor any manner of work; and if at times he felt like an acrobat, manipulating a coach and four on a six-foot path, no one ever suspected the fact.

From the start he had known enough of the invertebrate Kashmiri to realize that whatever needed doing must practically be done by himself, or by one of his four picked officers, whose cheerfulness, energy and devotion made ample amends for the callousness and covert opposition of corrupt officials who could no longer line their own pockets at the expense of the State. It did not occur to him that half the secret of his juniors' readiness and zeal lay in his own personality, that the man in whom power of command is tempered with justice and sympathy rarely complains of those serving under him. If he worked them hard, they knew that he worked himself harder, and rarely, if ever, took the ten days' shooting leave he was so ready to grant when the coil of things permitted.

Thus, with help on one hand and hindrance on the other, he had toiled up the sandy steeps of reorganization. An uneventful winter, free from the ache of separation, had given him leisure to push forward a score of local projects and schemes that cried aloud for completion; and Quita had loyally kept her promise never to let her craving for companionship hinder his work. Her love had lost nothing of its inspiring quality; motherhood itself had not tamed the sea-gull spirit of her; and for Lenox her presence had transformed the house. Of course she had no business to be there. That he knew; none better; knew how severely he would have criticised any other man in like circumstances. But Quita was not as other women; and they had eaten the bitter bread of separation *ad nauseum*, these two. At the time refusal had seemed harsh, unreasonable; and so far the risky experiment had not miscarried. But he had still to get

her back across that perilous route; a thought that had already hindered sleep.

If only events would allow him to keep her till July and see her safely over the passes—! That had been his hope. But with the oncoming of spring rumours budded and blossomed like all else on earth; and latterly the scraps of information that reached him had a disturbing coherence, a hint of gathering storm. When it might break overhead no man could guess; and only dread of the Burzil Pass prompted Lenox to put off the inevitable from day to day. No hope now of the joint return journey. To leave Gilgit himself would be unpardonable; but he thanked God for the good men under him, and decided on Wylie for choice. It was characteristic of the man that Quita knew nothing of his deliberations. Why darken the sunshine and kill the scent of the flowers before he need? She counted so jubilantly on these next few months together. In two weeks' time, when Gilgit's brief rapture would be over, they were to desert the valley for a summer camping-ground, two hours' ride above the house. Her thoughts and tongue ran incessantly upon the project. They would make an expedition up there on Sunday morning. Laurence must needs be introduced to the "divine discovery." Eventually she foresaw a hut there; and still more eventually, the babies themselves!

And while the woman built air castles, and the man wondered if his own anxiety were magnifying molehills, Sunday came around; a day of ethereal beauty and faint fragrances—violet, wild-rose, and scented broom; a day when storm-clouds of any kind seemed inconceivable, an insult to the spirit of Spring. For on this morning of May the ecstasy of life resurgent triumphed in orchards, mulberry grove and cornfield; in fairy tendrils of young vines; and in thickets starred with wild roses ranging from palest dawn flush to the sunset's crimson. The sweeping plumes of birches dropped golden rain; and every tamarisk bush in its scarlet-tasselled splendour seemed "a-fire with God." The whole wide valley lifted heavenward a pæon of light and colour and sound; for the Gilgit river thundered through all the length of it, with the resistless power of the sea, its green waves scattering diamonds for spray. And on either hand the

enclosing hills struck upward, in barren majesty. Above the rainless region patches and strips of forest loomed darkly; and above that again gleamed the stainless splendour of the snows. One of those rare days when earth and the glory of earth seem a vision of "love made manifest"; when Hope is translated into Faith, and Faith itself into a radiant assurance of things not seen.

Even Lenox, cloud-compassed as he was, could not steel his heart against its influence; and Quita trod upon air. They rode up to her camping-ground after breakfast, four of them; Laurence and Wylie completing the quartet, which split up inevitably after the start. Quita and Laurence led the way discussing effects and "glimpses" and planning future pictures to be added to her remarkable collection; and Lenox, deep in "shop" with Wylie, deliberately shut his ears to her low clear tones.

An hour's rest in the shade, Quita sketching while the men smoked, and they rode down again, in great contentment. But a mile from the house an approaching group of horsemen brought them to a standstill; and, as Lenox drew rein, the Governor of Gilgit cantered up—a plausible scoundrel, with a shifty eye under a lowering brow, and a coward's mouth hid in the thick of his beard.

"Ill news from Nagar, Colonel Sahib," he began; and Lenox, checking him with a gesture, turned to his wife.

"Ride on home you two," he said coolly. "Wylie and I will follow."

They obeyed, not without reluctance; Laurence, true to his race and age, hoping for action at any price. But he said nothing; and Quita fell silent also till the Agency was reached.

"My poor Eldred," she sighed as they dismissed their ponies. "He can't even get through Sunday without those wretched people worrying him. It's beyond me how he puts up with them all. I've seen deeper into things than he guesses this winter; and if ever there was a case of making bricks without straw—! Yet he wouldn't be anywhere else for the world. Queer creatures—we human beings!"

Laurence smiled reflectively. "I imagine that's where the interest of us comes in!" said he.

"Naturally! And it deepens in a direct ratio to the queerness! If we were all square-cut and flawless like window panes,—*Mon Dieu*, what a country-town-tea-party sort of world it would be! Most of our ideals and achievements are come at through the clash of opposites. Remember that, Mr. Laurence, when the spirit prompts you to marry. There's virtue in a misfit; presupposing always the sacred spark. Eldred and I are misfits; so I'm an authority on the subject—!"

A twinkle of amusement checked her fluent tongue, and she laughed outright.

"What a dissertation! It's just the Spring gone to my head. I'll pick violets for a change. Look at that bank! Isn't it a miracle? You shall have a button-hole of them to soothe you after two hours of my chatter."

She handled the flowers as one who loves them, and fixed them in his coat.

"Thanks," he said—and was smitten dumb. For their delicate scent wakened a rush of reminiscence; translated him from the Hindu Kush to that rough seat under the *sirus*, where Lyndsay had leaned towards him with shining eyes. "I do trust you implicitly." To him it seemed that even in death his ears would hear that music, his eyes see the blood steal into her cheeks under the long look that followed—

Quita, perceiving herself forgotten, laughed again, softly. "Eight annas for your thoughts!" said she; and he started.

"I—I beg your pardon. They had gone on a long journey. Back to Peshawur."

"You were happy there?"

"Yes—" he hesitated. Look and tone impelled confidence. "If it's possible to be happy and wretched at the same time."

"Why of course!" Her woman's complexity marvelled at the man's incredible simplicity. "It's one of life's most mysterious inconsistencies. And the wretchedness only makes the joy strike deeper."

"You evidently know—"

"Yes, I have known.—And—did she have eyes like those violets?"

He gazed at her blankly. "That's white magic!" was all he said.

"No. Only an artist's intuition.—Ah, there's my man! Well, what news?" This to Lenox as he joined them.

"A local affair. Come on to tiffin. We can talk afterwards."

And all through the meal she watched him, divining something hid. Then she went straight to their sanctum, the *dufter*, knowing that he would follow. As usual, she had stamped her impress on the place; her easel and canvasses littered one corner; her favourite books shamelessly invaded his writing-table; and the vases held great sprays of fruit blossom, cut with lavish disregard for practical issues. She herself stood by the mantelpiece absently rearranging her bowl of violets.

At his step she turned and came to him swiftly, laying both hands upon him.

"I know it's something horrible. I suppose I shall have to go?"

He put his arms round her, straining her close for a long moment; and she was answered.

"Sit down, please, and tell me everything," she said, gently pushing him into a chair. Then, picking up a stray pipe, she filled it from the brown jar of bachelor days. "It lubricates things!" she explained smiling, and returned to her post by the mantelpiece, knowing well that her own nearness would not lubricate things for either of them.

While he busied himself with the matches she spoke again.

"*You* can't come of course? But if you could spare Zyarulla, I honestly believe I could manage alone."

He looked up at her in amaze.

"Quita—what madness!"

Then, as the nature and sincerity of her proposal penetrated: "By the Lord, you're a plucky woman! You'd do it, I believe."

"But of course. If it would save you anxiety. Only I'm afraid—it wouldn't!"

"No—it wouldn't," he agreed, a mist of tenderness clouding his eyes. "I can't spare Wylie. Wish I could. But little Travers can see you to Astor, and scurry up

again by forced marches. At Astor, Barton can take charge of you and escort you to Kashmir. A good sort, if a bit thick-headed; and as cautious as they make 'em!"

Her smile had a tear in it. "I shall feel rather like a registered parcel, "Immediate. With Care!" And I am to be posted—when?"

"To-morrow, my dear, if you can get your traps together."

She caught her breath and glanced round the room. "I'll try."

"That's a good wife. You see I must get the troops off this evening and follow on first thing."

"Follow on? Where? You haven't told me yet what these unspeakable people have been doing?"

"Murdering one another," Lenox answered bluntly. "The Nagar Rajah, who is Prince Regent till his old father dies, has just had his two young brothers killed in cold blood. Such a good fellow, one of them; popular all round. I suppose the scoundrel thought we might support him later if it came to a free fight for the throne. But that's no business of ours. I rather wish it was! What affects us is that he has followed up his brutalities by threatening an attack on Chalt, Kashmir's last fort, out Hunza way—thirty miles off. They say he's got his forces together; but not feeling sure of his father is half afraid to act; and his hesitation gives us the ghost of a chance to nip in and secure Chalt before he knows we're on the move. *Now* you understand why it's a case of *ek dum!** I've despatched a couple of men, full speed, to cut the rope bridge at Chalt. Alan will take a handful of levies on ahead to secure Chaichar Parri, the key of the position; and the sooner we're all after him the better. Thank God there's no telegraph wire to trip me up; and by the time my 'express' reaches the Resident the whole show may be over."

He spoke of his plans in detail partly to keep emotion at arm's length, partly because of her keen interest in it all. But the more serious possibilities on the horizon he kept to himself.

She listened, half smiling, her eyes on his face.

"And it's not two hours since you heard the news!"

* At once.

was her comment. "You are prompt, *mon ami*. Did you expect this?"

"No. But up here a man must foresee complications and forestall emergencies. For weeks I've been suspecting rocks ahead."

"I thought something was worrying you. Why did you shut me out? You know I hate being simply a fair-weather wife."

"You're not that. Never could be. But I didn't see any use in blotting out your sunshine as well as my own."

At that she could maintain her Spartan aloofness no longer. Without a word she came to him, and perching on the wide arm of his chair stroked the hair at his temples with light finger-tips—a favourite caress.

"Well, what is it now?" he asked uneasily, dreading reaction.

"Only an insane desire to get near you, to touch you—while I can. Sometimes it comes over me—" Her teeth imprisoned a quivering lip; and Lenox pulled desperately at his pipe.

On the whole, no doubt, it had been good for them both, their time of struggle and loneliness. It had made more consciously precious these few months together. But there were moments when human nature rebelled. Suddenly Quita stooped and kissed his forehead; and a tear that hung on the brink of her eyes overflowed. He started; and his hand covered one of hers, gripping it hard.

"Dearest! You mustn't take it that way."

"I'm *not* taking it that way!" she declared stoutly between a laugh and sob.

"I thought not! After all we've had a good six months together; amd I'm pretty certain to be over in Kashmir by July. Meantime, there are the blessed babies; You must write to Honor and see what can be done about getting them up sooner. I thought Maurice Eldred was booked to usurp the throne, and reconcile you to the minor drawbacks of the position!"

She leaned lightly against his shoulder, answering nothing. A quiverful of babies could not compensate her for lack of the man; and he knew it.

"Quita, I'm ashamed of you!" he said with conviction; but the arm that quietly enclosed her told another story.

Sighing, she slid to her knees beside him, only to be gathered closer; while the silence and the sunshine throbbed with those "sovran privacies of speech" that are not of the lips, but of the heart.

"What about that packing?" the man asked at length, reluctantly enough.

"Oh, I shall manage it all right."

"I knew you would."

And dearly as she valued his rare caresses, that note of confidence in his voice was dearer than all.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied,
Over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

—WALT WHITMAN.

THAT May morning of peace gave place to a night of full moon; the sky, a blue-grey mystery, cloudswept and powdered with dust of topaz; snow peaks and valley and river splashed with a ghostly radiance that intensified the heart of darkness.

And there were earth lights also; stars of man's making, that far on into the night flashed red and yellow in the "cold o' the moon." Yellow, in the long windows of the Agency, where Quita packed assiduously, with tears catching at her throat; red and flaring along the reaches of the river, where lanterns and torches bobbed like will o' the wisps between the men's huts and the twig-rope bridge that spanned the Gilgit, a racing torrent a hundred and fifty yards wide. Here the main constellations clustered; a bevy of shifting lights and shadows, shouts of men mingling hoarsely with the rush and roar of the river. It was the first impediment in an obstacle race that might have been devised by some legendary giant for the entertainment of his victims; no mean impediment either, when a few hours lost might frustrate a brilliant *coup de main*. And it takes time for two hundred and thirty men to get over a railed tightrope that will not safely admit of more than six crossing at once.

By dusk the thing was done; the whole detachment, with full complement of rations, kit, and ammunition, were speeding in the wake of Laurence and his levies. But the crossing of a mule battery and two guns involved a hand to hand struggle with the river; for the mules, who had been out all day grain-carrying, a hazardous swim; for the guns, an impromptu raft. And steering

a raft by moonlight across a torrent in the Hindu Khush is an excitement not to be despised by seekers after sensational forms of danger. The men spent five hours wrestling with the stream; Lenox, on the bank, shouting an occasional order; atremble for the fate of his cherished guns.

In the first hour of morning he rode back to the Agency, anxious still, yet elated. His troops might be raw, but they had played up like men. Dawn would find them at Nomál, eighteen miles away; and he would be there in time to shepherd his sheep over the two severe marches that lay beyond. The whole expedition bristled with risks. That he recognised. But Zaffr Ali could not be suffered to "play the fool" unchecked; and the man who cannot take a risk in cool blood is no fit commandant for a Frontier outpost. Again he thanked his stars that the news could not reach Kashmir within the week, even by express—a letter in a red bag pushed through by *dák*-runners travelling night and day. In the house he found a subdued yet triumphant Quita ready poised for flight. A light meal together was followed by a memorable hour in their holy of holies, and a promise that if all went well she should return next summer.

By eight of the morning Lenox was again in the saddle; while Quita, booted and habited, fluttered a hand from the verandah porch, and thereafter stood watching him as he rode away—a blurred brown figure in a misty haze of white and green. But she would not cry. She had promised. Besides—in any circumstance it was a splendid thing to be his wife. That thought cleared the mist; and in the strength of it she returned to face breakfast and Jack Travers.

A two hours' canter took Lenox, with his local General and Pathan body-guard, to Nomál, where good news greeted him. The Chaichar Parri was in his hands; and the troops, strong in the faith of the Colonel Sahib's *izzat*, ready for instant advance. In any other country the twelve miles ahead would have been a light march; but Lenox knew too well the nature of the road; knew that, even to reach Chalt next day, the guns must be left to follow on. Fresh risk here, and no light one; marching two hundred and thirty men, without guns or

reliable knowledge of the enemy's movements, through the most tremendous defiles in the Hindu Khush. But pioneer work demands a certain deliberate audacity, peculiarly effective in dealing with natives; and Lenox was not the man to hesitate at the eleventh hour. In his bold game of bluff time was everything; time and a front of brass, no matter what anxieties might lurk within.

Leaving a small escort to improve the road, and to help with loading and unloading at impassable *parris*, he hurried forward through a land of death and desolation befitting the pen of a Dante, or the brush of a Salvator Rosa; through defiles and ravines, gashed here and there into gorges that sheered steeply to regions of glacier and eternal snow. And the tracks that invaded this stronghold of Mars were inhuman as the place itself; ledges two feet wide, notched tree trunks fixed in clefts, and wooden galleries clinging to precipices that dropped three hundred feet to the torrent below.

But for sheer abomination of desolation the great Chaichar Parri surpassed them all. A natural fortress here; rock-wall fronting rock-wall, stark and sombre; while upon the near side man's insect devices of gallery and tree-trunk showed like the tunnelling of white ants up the side of a house. A place to appal the imagination and shake the nerve of the strongest. A place where black doubts and possibilities cling like bats, where dreams and hopes seem incongruous as a bevy of butterflies. The worst place on earth for a man at loggerheads with Fate.

So Laurence had found it, and was the more relieved when Lenox bade him join the force, leaving half his men under Ghulam Bux to improve matters temporarily for the passage of the guns.

"Must have you on the spot, for the present. You shall come back and fix up a track for the return march, when I know the result of my practical joke! Just now Chalt's the main objective."

And the next afternoon they reached it, hot, thirsty and leg-weary, to find the rope bridge cut, and their arrival a complete surprise. So far good enough; and evening brought better. Shouts and throbbing of tom-toms preceded a picturesque rabble of local levies,

born fighters, armed with rough swords and brass-studded shields of hide. In response to an express from Lenox they had been hurled across the hills, led by the one trustworthy Rajah within hail, and officered by brothers and cousins to the third and fourth removal! A burly brave-hearted Moslem this, distrusted and disliked by his fellow chiefs, for mere loyalty to his admired friend the Colonel Sahib. He arrived in a state of jubilant exhaustion, having been on the march twenty-four hours without check; so that his men matched the Kashmir troops for weariness.

"If the Rajah-*lōg* attack to-night, they will score a point," Lenox remarked drily, his coolness cloaking the horde of anxieties that rode him. For the twin States had asserted that occupation of Chalt Fort would mean war; and Rumour reported a thousand men at Mayun and two hundred at Nilt eight miles on.

Mulk Amán shook a bulky turbaned head, and his teeth flashed in the dark of his beard.

"*They* will not attack, Colonel Sahib. I have known the Rajah-*lōg* many years, and they are as jackals in lions' skins striking only those who strike not again. Also I heard in coming that there is ill blood between them; the Hunza Thum having refused to kill his two nephews at Zaffr Ali's command."

"Who shall decide when scoundrels disagree?" Wylie's voice emerged pensively from his aura of tobacco smoke. "It's my private opinion that the Rajah-lōg are in a funk. The Colonel Sahib's promptness has taken their Majesties' breath away."

"Hope they don't get it back till the guns are up with us," Lenox answered, his gaze scouring the desolate valley, that here branches off towards Chaprót, another of the countless States wedged among the gorges of these hills.

Dinner was over, and the three Englishmen, with their Rajah friend, sat outside the tent, enjoying the cool evening stillness as only they can who have spent the burden and heat of the day between Chaichar Parri and Chalt Fort. Within and about this last the little camp and its outlying pickets and sentries were settling down for the night, with murmur of voices and clank of arms.

The Fort itself stood on a wide plateau, green with young corn; and high aloft the peaks of the Karakoram range were faintly luminous under the risen moon.

Lenox and Wylie, men of few words, missed the "Brat's" banjo and light-hearted nonsense; the more so since Laurence seemed to have left his spirits behind in Peshawur. He smoked abstractedly and in silence; a phenomenon the older man was quick to associate with his reserve on the subject of his holiday. But Mulk Amán, glorying in the day's achievement, secreted jubilation enough for three. The Colonel's last remark set him chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"Guns—*Inshallah!* The guns of the Maharajah in Chalt Fort! Doubtless word of their coming hath already reached Nilt, and the tail of the jackal droops beneath the lion's hide. Colonel Sahib, I speak truth. Never in all our wars hath an army forced the Chaichar Parri; and behold, in one day, three officer Sahibs and two hundred Kashmiris march through without guns, without hindrance, as though it were a trade route open to all! Such is the fashion of the English. They speak. They lift a hand. It is enough. Give only permission, Colonel Sahib, and to-morrow I send messengers to spread this day's work throughout the Indus valley. So shall the *ikbál* * of the Agency troops and of mine own also wax great and prevail."

Lenox had a smile for his ally's enthusiasm, and a nod of approval for the rest. Plainly success hung upon keeping up the great and glorious game of bluff. Exaggerated reports, false estimates of his strength, might stave off the serious danger of a general rising with which he would be powerless to cope.

"It is well spoken, Rajah Sahib," he said, "you have my leave."

The big man beamed like a child over a new toy.

"To-morrow then Colonel Sahib. Talk of war spreads through these hills like a flame through dried grass. Behold the Generailly Sahib. Doubtless he also will approve."

Emphatically the Generailly Sahib approved. Anything to swell the prestige of the British Agency, and, by implication, his own. A Sahib who treated his soldiers

* Prestige.

like sons was truly a leader of men; and when Lenox queried the soft impeachment, it transpired that the troops had been openly amazed and gratified at the personal attention bestowed upon them throughout the march. To Lenox and Wylie it had seemed a matter of simple duty; but the Kashmir sepoys, inured to starvation, irregular payment, and crass neglect, found it incredible that officers should trouble themselves about their food and welfare, should even stay by them on the road and see them safely over difficult places.

"Our own officers would have ridden on into camp, leaving them to manage as they could," the old man concluded truthfully enough. "This I told them; bidding them consider that it is because the English are as fathers to those who serve them that they rule over India and their honour is great in the land. To-night the sepoy-*lōg* are weary; but should the Nagar Rajah strike before dawn, by Allah, Colonel Sahib, they would fight like devils."

Thus, if there were anxieties, there were ameliorations also. If his men were few, the right spirit possessed them; and always there remained his twenty picked Pathans who would be worth ten Kashmiris apiece if it came to fighting, as well it might; for the position bristled with big issues. Here, on the utmost edge of Empire, one false move, one trifling error of diplomacy, might act as a fuse to a powder magazine. Clouds were massing on the political horizon. The shadow of Russian annexation loomed over the Pamirs, whence the octopus of Central Asia had stretched cautious tentacles down to Chitral on one side, and Hunza on the other; tentacles that took the shape of officers bent on sport or exploration:—and if they found a surveyor essential to their pastime, they did not proclaim the fact. Lenox as Warden of the Marches, acting for Kashmir, was responsible for the loyalty and safety of both States; and Hunza, though the smaller, had proved the more troublesome of the two. Its strategical position was of the strongest, and its ruler a cowardly scoundrel, whom Russian overtures and British subsidies had so disastrously inflated that he saw himself as an equal power, playing off two Empires against each other, able at his own pleasure to "let slip the dogs of war." And because this

last was not pure illusion Lenox knew he must walk warily, lest hostilities be forced upon him unawares. To startle the "Rajah-*lōg*" into passing submission had been the object of his daring move; and situated as he was with no reserves, an untrustworthy Governor at Gilgit, and useless regiments at Bunji and Astor, what wonder if he waited anxiously for the dawn.

In the small hours, shouts and shots from the sentries brought him out of his tent; and in three minutes the whole camp was alert, expectant. The sentries had seen lights in the river-bed; believed that men were scaling the plateau. But it seemed they had thought better of it; and after half an hour's blank suspense the concourse of dark figures dispersed, without seriously interrupting the moon's mystic colloquy with earth.

No sign of the enemy by day; and on the next night another false alarm, followed in due course by reports that the great Kings were inclined to temporize till they could discover the strength of the Gilgit force. Then Lenox knew that he must play a waiting game; pastime most uncongenial to the man with British blood in his veins.

But waiting need not imply inaction; and he congratulated himself on having secured that invaluable asset to Frontier work—a first-rate Sapper, one moreover whom it seemed impossible to tire. For if the Laurence of a happier day could not have been described as "a glutton for work," this new Laurence, who smoked too much and talked too little, seemed possessed by a demon of restless energy, more acceptable to Lenox the commandant, than to Lenox the man. He knew the symptoms too intimately to doubt the nature of the disease; knew that Laurence was trying to stay the heart's insatiable hunger with husks; and because his own years of struggle had taught him the comparative virtue of husks, he bestowed them lavishly upon his friend. He took care also that Laurence should realize the immense value of his services at such a moment.

Something of all this the Sapper understood, and expressed his gratitude, after the wordless manner of men, by working harder than ever, though the smart of a secret wound took half the flavour out of achievement. He and his men, reinforced by a company of Ghurkhas,

devoted themselves to attacking the Chaichar Parri, where Laurence, being in the mood for knocking his head against stone walls, wrought valiantly, working with his own hands in the heat and gloom of narrow defiles, clamorous with shouts of natives, with clatter of pick and hammer, and falling rocks. And in ten days a rough but serviceable mule road connected Chalt with the further side of Hunza's terrible Gate of Gates—the one crevice in his plate armour of granite and glacier. The fort itself had been repaired and the plan of a stronger one sketched for future use.

Lenox, meanwhile, was dealing with obstacles the more disheartening because they could not be tackled squarely, as Laurence tackled his cliffs. Each day the waiting game grew more harassing to himself, more wearisome to his men. And still the Rajah-*lōg* temporised. Chalt village was full of their spies, and of conflicting rumours that kept the troops in a simmer of unrest.

Letters at last from the twin States, but to small purpose. Hunza's, as always, writ in King Cambyses' vein, by a *munshi* with a rare gift of hyperbole. His Innocence disclaimed all connection with the Nagar murders. He, "the greatest of Eastern Kings, saving only the Khan of China," warned this venturesome Briton that by reason of his advance two Empires might shortly be wallowing in an ocean of blood.—"Is it peace or war, Colonel Lenox Sahib?" he concluded. "I, Hunza Thum,* care nothing for either, having but to send word beyond Kashgar, and the armies of China will come down in their hordes, sweeping away the pigmies of Kashmir as a wet cloth sweeps away a concourse of ants. But war being evil, I desire rather to cling to the skirts of the British Government as an infant to those of its mother. It is for the Colonel Sahib to decide."

But unhappily the Colonel Sahib was in no position to decide. Given half a dozen officers, two hundred regulars, and an off chance of grain enough for food, his answer to Hunza's bombast would have been instant action. Clearly there could be no security in this corner of the Frontier until the monarch who boasted descent from Alexander the Great by a fairy of the Hindu Kush, had

* Pronounce Hoonza Toom.

learnt, at the bayonet's point, his real position in the universe. But half punishment were worse than none; and until his hands were strengthened Lenox knew that his staple weapon must be diplomacy rather than force. Nagar's letter, couched in milder language, also implied that the Royal Twins, once more in accord, were anxious to defer hostilities to a more congenial moment.

"A clear case of we don't want to fight, but by Jingo if we do—!" was the comment of Laurence the irreverent, when the three officers and three privileged dogs, assembled for Mess that evening.

"Hope to goodness they keep it up!" Lenox answered, absently caressing the ears of his beloved bull-terrier. "If their Majesties had been Pathans we should have been wiped out days ago. I shall send two of Mulk Amán's levies back with their messengers to demand proper Vakils. A personal interview would give me a much better notion how the land really lies."

For two years of Gilgit had taught him to believe nothing offhand; to detect complicated motives under guileless words and acts. The "funk attitude," as he termed it, might well be assumed with a view to future treachery; a suspicion strengthened by reports that among themselves the messengers were talking of an attack on the place so soon as the troops retired. Next day they were dispatched with a couple of levies; and Lenox resigned himself to renewed waiting. The troops were heartily sick of inaction; but lack of reserves made a backward or forward move equally unsafe. Scarcely any grain was coming in from Gilgit, where the Governor amused himself by making mischief in all directions, and selling Government grain for his own profit. A distracted express from Travers reported: "Maunds lying idle at Astor; transport gone to the deuce, and the Bull Pup on the verge of hydrophobia." Should he himself take Mrs. Lenox on to Kashmir? To which Lenox replied, also by express: "Go ahead, and double march back to Gilgit."

The days grew into a week without bringing the Hunza-Nagar Vakils; and Lenox began to suspect foul play. But he hardened his soul against the prick of anxiety, by day if not by night, and maintained his front of brass.

In order to give his men a change from the dust and heat of Chalt, he shifted camp to an oasis in the valley of Chaprót, where the air was fragrant with cedars, and Rákápushi—sublimest peak of the Gilgit region—struck a note of ethereal alcofness upon a sky of passionate blue. Here the men recovered their spirits; huts walled and carpeted with cedar were the luxury of the moment. Wylie and Laurence explored tributary valleys, and Lenox spent most of his day wrestling with official correspondence, yet seemed to achieve nothing.

Nearly three weeks of harassing suspense had slipped away since that eventful Sunday, when Laurence and Wylie—returning from a two days' trip—found that the errant Vakils were even then interviewing Lenox in his tent. Hostilities were to be deferred; but the autumn campaign loomed definitely ahead. Hunza, grandiloquent always, denied allegiance to China and claims on Chalt; hinted darkly at powerful friends who would uphold him in the day of trouble; while vowing eternal loyalty to his agreement with the British Government. Yet Lenox knew that he was busy breaking all the terms of that agreement; raiding across the northern passes, levying black-mail, and secretly carrying on the forbidden trade in slaves. Verily a scoundrel of parts!

Lenox spent half the night reviewing the position in all its bearings; and because star-patterned darkness seemed always to distil wisdom and inspire judgment, he left his tent and paced to and fro in the prodigious dark of the cedars. Finally he decided on compromise. The troops should return to Gilgit· but he himself with a few picked men would go on into Hunza, and beard this lion, with the soul of a jackal, in his lair. The chief professed friendliness. He should be taken at his word; and, in the main, Lenox relied for safety and success on the power of his own personality no less than upon the moral effect of the bold straight course that "was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be" the shield and buckler of Greater Britain.

That being settled, he knew he should sleep; but in passing Laurence's tent a line of light between the flaps drew him towards it.

"Alan," he called in a low tone, and the flaps were parted instantaneously.

"Come along in, Colonel! Didn't know you were awake too."

"I've a right to be. You haven't. Thanks." He took the proffered chair and glanced at the closely written sheets on Alan's camp table. "You're not overdriven just now?"

"Lord, no. But it's pleasanter reading or writing than lying awake."

"You've no right to be doing that either. *You* haven't principalities and powers sitting on your chest! For God's sake don't give way to it, Alan." He spoke with sudden energy. "I know what I am talking about. I suffered Hell's own torment with it for years. I chiefly came in here to order 'lights out'; also to let you know that I have decided to tackle Hunza in person. It will prevent fresh designs on Chalt when we evacuate, and may smooth things over for the present. I shall take Mulk Amán and a few of his levies, beside my Pathan body-guard. Enough, I fancy."

He smiled in response to the eager question in Alan's eyes.

"You are thinking a Sapper might come in handy, eh? And I am wondering when he doesn't in this part of the world. Your work alone has made our little outing worth while."

"It's awfully good of you to say that, Sir."

"Nonsense, man. It's the truth; and you deserve to know it. As for Hunza, with a campaign in view it might be a good chance for you to take a look at the country beyond this, sketch likely positions, and make out a few reports. Yes—I'll take you. Ghulam Bux can go on down to Hatú Pir and get things started. That's settled then; and you go straight to bed, without finishing this!"

He tapped the letter to Lyndsay with a significant smile.

"I swear I will," Laurence answered heartily, "I can't tell you what a lift you've given me, Colonel. Good-night."

"Good-night old chap, sleep soundly."

And Laurence obeyed.

## CHAPTER XIX.

We know what Heaven and Hell may bring
But no man knoweth the mind of the King.
Of the Grey-coat coming, who can say?
When the night is gathering all is grey.
—KIPLING.

"GREAT Heavens, what a country! A fit setting for the battles of gods, and heroes!"

It was Laurence who spoke; and Lenox smiled approval at the note of enthusiasm which he had missed since his friend's return. "And instead—behold Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee playing the fool with three harassed British Officers. Something wrong with the stage management! That's clear."

The two officers had ridden on ahead of their reduced party and had halted for half an hour's rest on the ridge of a seven-hundred-foot ravine beyond the fortified villages of Nilt and Mayun, where a thousand men had been checked by two hundred and thirty plus the moral effect of an unexpected move.

Lenox looked thoughtfully down upon the two brown blotches, set on cliff-walled plateaus green with orchard and cornfield, walnut and plane.

"Strikes me we've scored a point! And unless Hunza changes his tune considerably, it may still be our privilege to give the greatest of Eastern Kings his first taste of defeat—an invaluable item in any man's education! Tell you what, Alan, you might leave the day before I do, with a few Pathans, so as to get a good halt at Mayun, and make a thorough sketch and report of the whole position. A colossal setting for a fight, as you say."

For, in the steep narrow valleys of Hunza-Nagar, towering granite masses crowd close on either hand—intimate, terrible; producing a dread oppression of height, even as the Indus valley produces a dread oppression of

width. A land dedicated to the God of Battles. Every village a fort in an emerald setting. No sign otherwhere of human activity, save an occasional *sangar** on jutting ledge or defensible height; good for attack or refuge in event of surprise. Southward the hills opened out toward Chalt; but northward was the great view: —ravine beyond ravine; sombre crags, frost-shattered and scarred; giant glaciers plunging downward from deific peaks that soared twenty-five thousand feet into the blue.

Two days of rough marching brought them to the confines of Hunza proper; the robber fastness that for centuries had been a by-word of tyranny and terror from Kashmir to Yarkund. From the broad main ravine, one broken path—kept so, for safety—climbed the cliffs that shield the valley from invasion; and a fortified tower on the summit carried a plume of wood-smoke—insignia of vigilance. It was easy to be seen how effectually these "gentlemen of the road" could annihilate unwelcome guests.

But to-day Hasanabad plateau was crowded, with courtiers and citizens; hard-featured mountaineers, in silks or homespuns, and rolled woollen caps, from which coils of hair, like grotesque ear-rings, hung almost to their shoulders. Tom-toms, kettle-drums, and embryo clarionets, throbbed and wailed like souls in torment; and well ahead of all, the Thum's Wazir, in velvet and kinkhob, advanced to greet the two khaki-clad officers, whose reticent, well-groomed persons stood for that unknown quantity—the Indian Empire. The tenth century confronting the nineteenth, with only bed-rock human nature to bridge the gulf. But your Indian political soon learns the trick of stepping to and fro among the centuries without mental dislocation; and by now Lenox was an adept at compliments and ceremonies sanctified by a thousand years of use.

It transpired that His Highness had been prevented by recent fever from greeting the Colonel Sahib in person.

The Colonel Sahib was overwhelmed with regret.

His Highness sent word that he regarded the Colonel Sahib as his father, and desired a state reception on the morrow; also that his guests should make their official

*Stone breastwork.

entry on that day, when the Wazir himself would fire the salute. As many guns as the Colonel Sahib chose to command—high-water mark of honour! For the salute is dearest of all earthly vanities to a right-minded Indian Prince; and the one little cannon on the polo ground was Hunza's favourite toy. Moreover, its history was unique. Like most state possessions it had been come at by theft, and christened with blood. Every brass vessel in the country had been seized by the Thum of an earlier day, to find material for it; and the refugee metal-worker who cast it, in the hope of pleasing this whimsical tyrant, had been summarily "removed" lest he cross the river and make one for the chief of Nagar also.

Advancing thus, to the accompaniment of crowds, compliments and a persevering band, the main valley in all its rugged and stupendous beauty came fully into view. Here the Kanjút torrent, cutting its way through cliffs three hundred feet high, forms a natural barrier between the twin States; and on either side the terraced cultivation of the Himalayas rises, tier upon tier, to the verge of snowfields, or bare granite where no life is. A valley carved and moulded by glaciers, whose melting ice feeds the skilfully constructed water channels, that flow like arteries from the stony heart of the hills.

Before dark, Lenox and his Rajah friend had encamped on a spur looking across corn-land and orchards to far-famed Rákápushi; nineteen thousand feet of rock and glacier and stainless summit, "deep-shadowed with impenetrable purple." To the right, a jumble of mud cubes—the houses of the main village—climbed a higher spur crowned by the Fort Palace of His Highness Karim Khan; the whole structure dwarfed to a molehill by the immensities beyond, whose ultimate pinnacles, where no snow could rest, rose black and tapering like spires of some vast cathedral against a molten sky. And over all, immeasurably far and pure, one silver peak seemed to hover, like a disembodied spirit, between earth and heaven.

Next morning Laurence was despatched with surveyor and camera, while Lenox resigned himself to the leisurely preliminaries of the political game as it is played in India. A State interview implied full-dress uniform, already procured by "express" runners from Gilgit, together with

many *kiltas* of presents no less indispensable to the task in hand. For, from the days of Solomon to those of Karim Khan, no State visitation is complete without the equivalent of "camels that bare spices and very much gold and precious stones."

But before the presentation of these Lenox must needs present himself, in all the discomfortable splendour of frock coat, spiked helmet, sword and sabre-tasche. Rajah Mulk Amán, with four of his men and four Pathans, completed the *cortège* that climbed the narrow pathways of the citadel, to the thunder of an imperial salute and the deafening jubilation of tom-toms; while all Hunza, squatting on rocks and house-tops, came out to see.

It is no mean achievement for a man, booted and spurred, and measuring six foot four in his helmet, to negotiate a rickety ladder and emerge with dignity through a square hole in the floor; and Lenox thanked Heaven devoutly when the ordeal was over. The wide mud-walled room—its skylight and balconied window innocent of glass—was packed with courtiers duly brocaded and embroidered for the occasion. In an open space two chairs were set; and Karim Khan—sworn ally of the World's Empires—advanced to meet Lenox down an avenue of men armed with breechloaders, English and Russian.

No imposing tyrant this, for all his brocaded robe, his belt studded with coral and turquoise, and the sword and revolver at his waist; but a slip of a boy, not three and twenty, fair as an Italian, with chestnut beard, and oblique, shifty eyes. Yet Lenox knew of the dastardly triple murder by which he had gained the throne; knew also of his ingenuous report to Government: "By the will of God my father and I fell out. He and my brothers died suddenly, and I have ascended the throne." But for his honoured guest, and sometimes foe, he was a being all smiles and compliments; while Lenox, inwardly fretting at wasted time, must of necessity follow suit.

The interview that supervened was as full of words and as devoid of matter as every right-minded State interview has been from the beginning of days. There is no going straight to the point with an Eastern Prince. If he meant to murder you, he would only do so "after compliments";

and in his eyes the incurable bluntness of the Briton is simply lack of manners. Thus, as was meet, the afternoon was devoted to an interminable polo match, the evening to a no less interminable exhibition of savage dancing, till the brains of the Englishmen whirled and their nerves grew restive under the ceaseless wailing and shuddering of the band.

Not until the third day could the chief be induced to pay Lenox an unceremonious visit in his tent, accompanied only by the armed escort that shadowed his down-sitting and up-rising. Laurence with six Pathans had already started for Mayun; and Lenox, whose soul was sick of polite futilities, plunged without preamble into the main points at issue.

Chalt, the beloved bone of contention, was scornfully waved aside. The Colonel Sahib need have no fear. He, Hunza Thum, was a man of "one heart and one tongue." Nevertheless in respect of visits from Russian officers, his tongue was singularly ambiguous, plausible, reserved. Every word he spoke, or refrained from speaking, strengthened the Scot's racial predilection for the iron hand, rather than the silken glove; and when at length he broached the thorny question of renewed raids on the caravan route between India and Asia, his tone and bearing passed from cool politeness to unmistakable decision.

"One thing at least is certain," he concluded gravely. "If your Highness means to retain the friendship of our Government it will be necessary to forego practices that hinder trade and are a disgrace to your own country."

Despite professed clutchings at the skirts of British authority, Karim Khan was clearly taken aback. It struck him that this was putting things quite the wrong way about.

"Your Honour is mistaken," he answered with an undisguised flash of resentment. "This matter is no disgrace. It has been the *dastúr* of my country for many hundred years. How otherwise would money accrue to the State? A man cannot wring water from a dry dishcloth; and there is no more to be got from the landholders, even by strong pressure. As for these Kirghiz, they are like sheep, whose wool any man may take.

Only a fool would stay his hand; and the Thums of Hunza are no fools, Colonel Sahib. If the Government of India makes demand that I altogether forego my customs, then I also make demand for a subsidy large enough to cover loss of revenue to my State."

For a moment the two men measured one another with their eyes. Lenox was wondering how to deal with a being so sublimely unaware of his position in the scheme of things. For him the Queen Empress was merely a chief like the rest, the Czar of Russia, or the Maharajah of Kashmir. They were all one to this King who was too "great" to travel and enlarge his mind; and since he lived by levying blackmail on the surrounding tribes, he made his proposal unblushingly, as a mere matter of course.

Lenox was tempted to answer sharply that in his opinion the present Thum was knave and fool in one; and perhaps the temptation coloured the tone of his reply.

"Your Highness must understand once for all that I cannot possibly bargain with my Government on your behalf. Among our people it is the simple duty of a ruler to protect trade, and to defend those who cannot fight for themselves. Also it is not our *dastúr* to give or take bribes in such matters. I am here to request that this trouble of the road shall be stopped; and that only our own officers shall be allowed free passage through your State. But I am not empowered to make promises in respect of your subsidy, which is already a generous one, as you are aware."

Lenox spoke quietly, but his voice had the ring of authority, and his gaze never left the shifty face. He saw it darken with anger; saw the long fingers close instinctively upon his sword hilt. Obviously the descendant of Alexander did not relish the note of command in any voice but his own. Yet, for the life of him, he could not look this imperturbable white man in the eyes.

"I know not how it is with your people, Sahib," he said, at length, with smothered wrath. "But the men of my country dare not refuse a great King, like myself, in such a fashion, face looking to face. It is their habit to consent with the lips, if not with the heart; to promise, though they may not perform."

"That I can well believe, Thum Sahib," Lenox answered, smiling, as he watched the boy's fingers slip reluctantly from the jewelled sword. "Your subjects have learnt politeness in a rough school. But among white men it is different. They speak truth without fear, even before great kings, like your Highness. Moreover, I speak now as one King to another; being the mouthpiece of the *Burra Lât* Sahib* himself."

"And you will bear to the *Burra Lât Sahib* my message that I cannot forego so great a portion of my State revenue, unless he seeth fit to make good the loss!"

There's your East! Refuse an Oriental twenty times over, and on the twenty-first he will restate his case as confidently as though the subject had never been mentioned between you. For all his annoyance, Lenox had some ado not to smile.

"An answer is an answer, Thum Sahib," said he in a level tone. "And your Highness has had mine. Doubtless the Government of India will take due measures to protect the road. It is enough."

Then, seeing that a cloud of sulkiness darkened the young chief's face, he added a diplomatic proposal that his guard should go through their drill and firing exercises for the amusement of his Highness. The idea was a happy one. Curiosity conquered sulkiness; and ten stalwart Pathans—by no means loth to impress the Rajah Sahib with their appearance and accomplishments—went through an exhibition of volleys and firing movements in quick time. The cloud, it seemed, had vanished; but Lenox, covertly watching his visitor, noted that whenever the rifles came up to the "present," he flinched in spite of himself. There is no coward like the coward who has other men's blood on his soul; and to be covered by ten muzzles was too much for the descendant of Alexander. Five times he endured it; but upon the sixth rose with a nervous laugh, and a remark that assuredly the Sahib's soldiers knew their work, but he had seen enough drill for one morning.

"'Thank God and there's an end of that!'" Lenox quoted mentally as he watched the little *cortège* climb the hill to the city. "Now for the gold, frankincense

* The Viceroy.

and myrrh! Hope they give the finishing touch to my morning's work."

A hope somewhat unexpectedly fulfilled. Etiquette forbidding public presentation, their equivalent was despatched under charge of an orderly; and in this instance comprised such costly trifles as a Winchester repeating rifle with cartridges, a state *choga*, gilt-edged turbans, hunting knives, and embroidered saddle-cloth; while the ladies of the zenana—on no account to be overlooked—received striped silks and strings of coral, supremely coveted; looking-glasses, brocades, and soap, also coveted—for the sake of the wrappers!

Glad to be rid of them, and heartily desiring the morrow, Lenox busied himself with his official report of an uncongenial interlude successfully accomplished.

But the end was not yet.

Before two hours were out a shadow darkened the tent. It was the orderly from the palace; and to Lenox' sharp "*Kyá hai?*"* he answered with a salute: "*Hazúr*, the Rajah Sahib sits angry. His countenance towards your Honour's presents is not good. He bade me bring word that there is not gold enough on the *choga*, that he desires a saddle for the saddle-cloth, and money in addition to the gifts for the zenana."

He paused, because the countenance of his own Sahib was not good either. Lenox sat scowling and tugging at his moustache, privately damning the descendant of Alexander for a "grasping, insolent little beggar!" But since a clash at the wrong moment was a catastrophe to be avoided at all costs, he saw himself doomed to the retort courteous sore against his will.

"Well? Is that all?" he asked quietly, as the man still stood before him fingering his rifle.

Alas, it was the prelude, merely, of a tea-cup storm that might prove serious enough. It appeared that upon the arrival of Lenox' deputation, the Thum had flown into one of his unreasoning rages. Scarcely glancing at the presents, he had flung them about the room with offensive epithets; boasting of far costlier gifts lately received from a Russian officer; declaring himself already in treaty with the "manly grey-coats," whose agents did

* "What is it?"

not insult great kings with unworthy offerings and refusals of small requests. Clearly the outburst of a spoilt child, and a dangerous one, capable of almost anything, in the way of treacherous folly, while the mood was upon him.

A council of war with the shrewd and jovial Mulk Amán ended in his departure for the palace, bearing, as olive branch, his own costliest *choga.* "And as for this fool's talk of grey-coats," he said at parting, "I will pour the oil of truth upon the waters of distemper, Colonel Sahib; bidding his Highness consider that though there be many races of earth, there is only one nation of *real* Sahibs—and they are English."

"British!" the Scot corrected with a twinkle, "if I'm to share the compliment?—Look sharp back, Rajah Sahib. It's ill work waiting."

And within the hour he returned, triumphant, minus the *choga;* plus the Wazir, who purred explanation and apology. After a few days of fever, he declared gravely, his Highness was often as one without sense. On the morrow he would be another man. The Colonel Sahib would see.

But Lenox, having his own opinion in the matter, made a leisurely tour of the camp before dusk, ordering ammunition-boxes to be opened up and the fighting men to hold themselves in readiness. The thrill of danger passed through the little community like an electric discharge; and soon after dark Lenox knew that his worst fears were justified. Three of his followers had been rudely prevented from leaving camp, and the orderly reported a wide ring of Hunza pickets enclosing the whole.

Lenox set his teeth and his eyes took on their blue of steel. "Thank God, Alan's all safe," was his first thought; and to the Pathan he replied coolly: "Strike the tents, and have the baggage ready. We march at dawn—or fight, as the Thum Sahib wills."

His own tent he left standing. It could be struck and packed in five minutes; and sitting down at his paper-strewn table, he forced his brain to a dispassionate review of the position. It could not well have been worse. Among a hundred and fifty followers, thirty fighting men. His camp commanded on all sides. In his rear, a snow-

swollen torrent, whose twig-rope bridge would of course be cut; and, even if he could fight his way out of Hunza, the three awful marches back to Chalt could never be forced by his handful of men.

No; if Hunza were scoundrel enough to strike, the result was pre-ordained: for himself and his little party—annihilation; for the Government a Frontier campaign, possibly a war, at a moment when all his energies had been strained to keep the peace. It was like the man to set the political disaster in the forefront of his brain; but in the background visions of his wife and of the children she had given him, hovered like the flutter of soft wings in a stillness that magnified each whisper of the night.

Finally he took pen and paper, and in a few straight words blessed her for all she had been to him—as wife, comrade, source of inspiration; sealed and addressed the envelope and slipped it into his breast pocket. Then he spent a great while writing his usual letter, and enlarging on the humours of propitiating Rajah-log. Not a word of his present predicament.

So the night fell away till the small hours had almost swelled to three; and the tread of the sentry halted at his tent door.

"*Hazúr!*"

Lenox looked up sharply.

"What is it? Come in—"

And he came forthwith, his news in his eyes.

"*Hazúr*, the pickets are being withdrawn, very swiftly, very silently, as though they feared our knowledge of their presence."

"Doubtless they do," Lenox answered grimly; and the man smiled.

"Even a Mullah cannot know the mind of the King. We march at dawn then, *Hazúr?*"

"We march at dawn."

Alone again, Lenox drew a great breath.

"Damned cheek of the little scoundrel giving us all a fright for nothing!" was his masculine comment. Then, with a deliberate satisfaction, he drew out the envelope he had pocketed, and tore it into shreds. That done, he took off his coat, flung himself upon his camp bed, and in three minutes was sound asleep.

Long before the sun had looked over the snows, the reprieved cavalcade was drawn up in close formation, ready to shake the dust of Hunza the inhospitable off its feet. Before starting, Lenox took a last round, half expectant of further treachery; and lo, down the hill from the city rode a party of horsemen headed by his friend the Wazir, while the guns of his parting salute set the hills rumbling like discontented lions roused from sleep.

The old man cantered up smiling affably, as though no shadow of treason had blackened the night, and announced the fulfilment of his prophecy that to-day his Highness was 'another man.' He had sent two ponies for the return journey, together with the pious hope that the Colonel Sahib's Kismet might be as that of emperors, and his feet never light upon stones of stumbling. He desired also that the Colonel Sahib would consider the small matter of the subsidy, bearing in mind that England and Hunza were as brothers of one birth, as children nourished at one breast. All of which Lenox accepted for what it was worth, promising himself some straight speaking on paper, in due time.

The Wazir, openly anxious to propitiate, insisted on conducting his guests to the plateau of Hasanabád; and before parting Lenox learnt how half through the night the fate of the camp had been tossed to and fro like a polo ball among vociferous players; the rapacity of the younger men, eager for booty, being ultimately overborne by the elder counsels of wisdom; he himself dominating these last. And if trouble should arise doubtless the Colonel Sahib would remember this fact in his favour.

Lenox assured him, with compliments, that one good turn deserved another; and so rode on to Chalt, reflecting half cynically, half seriously upon the dangers, the humours, and the seeming futilities of High Politics on the Edge of Empire.

## CHAPTER XX.

For nothing of me or around—
But absent She doth leaven;
Felt in my body as its soul,
And in my soul—it's Heaven.
—FRANCIS THOMPSON.

"HOT enough, isn't it? You're in luck to be off Simla way, Colonel. And I suppose you'll put in a few weeks at Gulmerg?"

"Yes. I think so." Lenox smiled reflectively at an ascending plume of smoke. "Wish you had a pleasanter programme ahead," he added kindly. "Your work on the Chalt road deserves a better reward than banishment to the infernal regions."

"Don't let that worry you, sir. I'd as soon be there as anywhere—once you're out of Gilgit. Besides—I'm restless nowadays without a good hard bone to break my teeth on."

Lenox nodded in profound comprehension; and for a space the fumes and fragrance of tobacco hinted feelingly at the futility of words. They were back again in the Agency study; room of sacred memories, where one of them still heard the whisper of a woman's skirt.

Ten days earlier Lenox had ridden in from Chalt, leaving Laurence to solidify work already done and carry on the mule track from Chaichar Parri to Nomál. For himself he had found, as he expected, that malign forces had been secretly at work, undermining his influence, stirring up strife, and finally unsettling the childish Gilgitis by rumours that he and his party had been cut to pieces in Hunza. Flagrant peculation and collapse of transport contracts completed the disarray of his kingdom; while the arch offender received him with smiles of the silkiest and fervent gratulations on his success. But little drawbacks of this kind were all in the day's

work as he had known it for two years; and already the district responded to his strong hand on the reins. A successful visit of inspection from the Kashmir commander in chief had further strengthened his prestige; and political anxieties had been lulled by letters from Simla, recognising the gravity of the Hunza problem and summoning him to an immediate discussion of the situation. Thus while he sat silent, exhaling grey films with a luxury of deliberation, thoughts and plans jostled one another in the crowded theatre of his brain; though at the moment, the great game and its issues had given place to concern for the obvious trouble shadowing Alan's heart. Remembrance of his own journey to the deep, prompted him to a word of sympathy or encouragement before parting; no easy achievement for a man encased by Nature in the plate-armour of reserve.

"I share your predilection for hard bones!" he said, at last, shifting his pipe into a far corner, and talking between the puffs. "Nothing like 'em for putting grit into a man. It's the time of year I regret, and—your present frame of mind." A half articulate sound from Alan's chair urged him to add: "But if things go crooked and the blue devils get a hold on you, it may encourage you to realize that in the event of an autumn campaign there's no over-estimating the importance of a decent path along that bit of the route. It will mean getting my troops up in half the time, to say nothing of the effect on the eternal transport muddle. You'll think of that when the bad moments come—eh, old chap?"

"Of course I shall, Colonel." Laurence sat forward impulsively, and the light in his eyes was a pleasant thing to see. "I sha'n't forget your goodness in speak-of it, either; and I'll work like the devil sooner than fail you. I only hope they give you all the troops you want."

"I fancy they will—this time. They seem to have grasped the fact that the only road to security in this corner of the Frontier lies over Hunza's body! He's pretty safe to have another try for Chalt—or Budlas; and once I get two hundred regulars and a dozen picked officers we shall be able to knock some of the gas out of him!—By the way, I thought of asking for your friend Finlay and a few of his Punjabis. Think he'd like it?"

"Sure he would. He'd give anything for a billet up here, only—there's a girl in Peshawur—"

Lenox smiled.

"More than one I imagine! Unless—it's not the same, is it?"

"No—no." A long silence; and Laurence resumed his pipe, reddening furiously through his tan. Lenox ventured a step further.

"Don't lose heart, Alan. It may work out—eventually. I had to grind through five years without a glimmer of hope; and now you see—?"

"Yes. I have seen—" A suspicion of bitterness here. "But in this case—it's a *cul de sac*." Another long pause. Then the habit of truth prevailed. "She's married. I—it was instantaneous—before I realized—"

"Good God!—Sorry I forced your hand."

"You didn't. I'd sooner you knew."

"Cruel bad business."

Alan assented dumbly; and no more was said. But they parted for the night with a prolonged hand grip; an occurrence rare enough to speak volumes.

Two weeks later Laurence sat alone outside his tent near the summit of Hatú Pir watching the sun's triumphal exit behind the rugged peaks of the Hindu Raj. Here, above the rainless region, June brought her yearly tribute of thunder and showers, her continents of dazzling cloud upon a league-deep ocean of blue. But relief had been long in coming; and not until this, the last of the month, had her opening storm washed the world. And after the storm—the stillness. After the tempestuous gloom of lightning-streaked indigos and greys, the evening's blue serenity, bringing all the mountains nearer, revealing each carven line, each streak of primeval colour, enriching purple depths of shadow. Only the molten splendour of the West was barred with cloud, blurred as it were with trailed smoke from hidden fires. And, with the waning of light, sounds had waned also; leaving only the two permanent voices of the Hatú Pir—the rattle of an occasional stone shower; the eternal murmur of the river, miles below; and of a sudden, a lammergeir, swooping down from the upper air, flashed past like a streak of

black lightning, intensifying the after quiet by the mighty rush of his wings.

On a camp table at Alan's elbow stood the last phase of his *al fresco* meal. He himself leaned back in his chair, seemingly absorbed in the glory of earth and sky; actually listening for the jingle of bells that would mean a *dák*-runner with letters—the event of the day. His last from Peshawur was more than a month old; and this evening the iron hand of exile was heavy upon him. The night before, Lenox had slept at the camp on his way through to Kashmir; and Laurence had accompanied his Chief down to the sun-scorched valley, riding up into the storm on his return.

How welcome the interlude had been he did not realize till it was over. He was still young enough for a repressed form of hero-worship; and knowledge shared in an inviolate silence had drawn him appreciably closer to the man he delighted to serve. His departure from the district completed Alan's sense of isolation. He had accomplished a hard day's ride in the breathless heat that precedes storm; and for the moment vitality was at a low ebb.

With the discomfortable vividness of his type, he anticipated the heat and loneliness of the coming weeks, the deeper loneliness of the years. There are scores of men, capable of unswerving devotion to wife or mother, yet wholly independent of feminine sway in the abstract; men for whom woman, at her dearest, is rather life's best adjunct than the core of life itself. Lenox, Rivers, Finlay were, more or less, of these; but for Laurence the woman influence, fully realized, was supreme. Herein lay the essence of his tragedy; and to-night, as he sat visualizing the years ahead, with their increasing need for companionship, for that intimate fusion of two lives in one, which is "the greatest proof of God to man," he foreknew the day when the baser nature would urge disloyalty to his higher self, which was hers inalienably, while breath remained in his body.

"Lord, what a despicable crew of earth-worms we are!" he reflected bitterly; and, as if in satiric assent, came the jangle of bells that banished all considerations but one. Would she speak to him now, and reprove his graceless

mood? Her letters had a knack of coming just when endurance was nearing its limit. He sat upright, curbing impatience, dreading disappointment. Something whispered that in moments of real need she would never fail him.

The post bag, unlocked, revealed a letter and a book parcel addressed in her delicately firm hand-writing. The last was an innovation; and he cut the strings with quickened breath.

" 'New Poems'—by Francis Thompson." And on the fly leaf an inscription that crowned amazement with content.

"A. L., from his friend, Lyndsay Videlle."

That it could be a gift, he had not dreamed; a gift so perfectly appropriate to their relation, and to his own mood of the moment. What heavenly impulse could have so inspired her? He opened the envelope and found his answer within.

"A cousin sent me these last mail," she wrote, "because he found them strangely like Father's best work; and so do I. But devotion does not blind me to the fact that though Father had flashes of true genius, this is surely one of the immortals. Since the book came I have read nothing else; and now I feel impelled to pass the joy of it on to you. Its greatness of thought and speech will match the greatness of your mountains; and for months of loneliness one could hardly wish a more inspiring companion than this poet who can so triumphantly scale the heights, in spite of—perhaps because of—his terrible intimacy with the depths. True greatness implies capacity for both. The Devil at grips with the Angel—subdued, yet always there. Don't you agree?"

He read on, fascinated, absorbed. Depression and weariness evaporated under the spell of her pen—always readier than her tongue; and, in this case, stirred to eloquence by a congenial subject.

But full enjoyment of the letter required some knowledge of the book; and taking it up he turned its pages in search of those faint pencillings that revealed her more clearly than written or spoken words. During the process murmurs of admiration broke from him. He was poet enough to recognise in this new singer a star of the

first magnitude; and there, while the pageant in the West flamed and died, he read that regal "Ode to the Setting Sun" which is, in itself, a pageant of colour and sound; a deathless vindication of Death's fruition. Then, eager for more, he passed on to the Anthem of Earth, surrendering his soul to the onrush of its majestical cadences; reading and re-reading, with an exalted thrill, certain lines, doubly pencilled, that echoed in his brain for days.

> "This is the enchantment, this the exaltation
> The all-compensating wonder,
> Giving to common things wild kindred
> With the gold-tesserate floors of Jove;
> Linking such heights and such humilities,
> Hand in hand in ordinal dances,
> That I do think my tread
> Stirring the blossoms in the meadow grass
> Flickers the unwithering stars.
> This, to the shunless fardel of the world,
> Nerves my uncurbéd back; that I endure
> The monstrous Temple's moveless caryatid,
> With wide eyes, calm, upon the whole of things,
> In a little strength."

Brave words to sleep on; and since the page had become a grey blur, he closed the book, with a sigh of such content as proved him also kindred to the "unwithering stars."

By now the pageant was ended, save for a faint reflection on the snows like a flush in the cheeks of old age. Already unseen hands were drawing violet curtains across the sky, while a halo in the east heralded the full moon. And Laurence sat on awaiting earth's transfiguration with the vague thrill that moon-rise brings to the imaginative; his exalted spirit touched to fine issues by contact with a poet's genius and a woman's soul.

At the end of an hour he sat there still—in a changed world; a world no less stern and silent, yet mysteriously softened and spiritualized as if by the brush of a consummate artist. Above a curded rack of cloud the moon shone out like a great white flower, eclipsing the stars, caressing the scarred faces of rock and precipice, transforming their harshness and sterility to her own heavenly purposes.

And for Laurence the scene was no unmeaning miracle

of light and shadow. For him, moonlight in its purity and tenderness, its power of conjuring ugliness into beauty, possessed a more than imaginary affinity with the beloved woman and her effect on himself; and, all imperceptibly, the idea had so gained on him that, in defiance of common-sense, the light fortnight brought with it a strange sense of communion between her spirit and his own. Fantastic unreality, no doubt. But man cannot live by bread alone; and in all such seeming unrealities his essential self discerns a diamond sparkle of truth. So Laurence sat on; "lost in a thicket of night thoughts," till sleep hung heavy on his lids, luring him back to the prose of yellow lamplight, and the cramped stuffiness of his little tent.

But in those two hours his mood had changed. The world, even his own stern corner of it, seemed a few degrees less callous, less empty, than at sunset; and such hours, though seldom recognized or recorded, are among the most real events of life. It is theirs to recharge the human battery with vital forces that are the mainsprings of action and high endeavour; and in the strength of them Laurence returned, with fresh heart of grace, to the complex engineering difficulties involved in the conquest of Hatú Pir; a temporary conquest at best. For the formidable ridge was no wall of rock, but a gigantic pile of *débris*, rotten at the core. Landslips and incessant stone showers precluded all hope of a permanent path; and in bad seasons the whole mass seemed to be stealthily on the move. The Government road, plodding laboriously up from Kashmir, would possibly solve the problem by cutting its way straight through the mountain; but to Laurence was consigned the discouraging task of exhausting brain and body in the achievement of a track that under the best conditions might last a year.

With every mile of descent towards Ramghat the sun smote more fiercely upon bare rock, and bare bodies of long-suffering men. The mercury in Alan's tent rose daily, till it touched 125°—which sufficed! There were moments of inevitable despondency when heat disintegrated nerve and muscle, when stone showers swept away the work of days, or a crumbling foot-hold flung a couple of coolies shrieking into the void. But thought of

the campaign, of the Colonel's reliance on his progress, heartened him unfailingly; and he braced himself with the reminder that he was but a unit in the battalion of lonely workers scattered broadcast over India's colossal emptiness; lonely planters among the foot-hills; District Officers in the salt ranges, counting camels and weighing salt, year in year out; Civil Engineers, encamped on glaring reaches of river or canal; and scores of others, whose conditions of life and work were infinitely harder than his own. For, despite the ache of exile, there is virtue in a solitude that compels closer intimacy with mountain and torrent, snow peak and glacier, with the myriad harmonies of sunset and dawn. The dweller in towns,—where all things seem designed for human convenience,—or the squire of fat pastures,—of elm, hedge-row, and browsing sheep,—may delude himself into the belief that he is lord of creation; that the clouds are his private watering-cans; the sea a patent ozone distillery for his benefit; moor and wood-land, delectable spots where birds congregate mainly in order to gratify his primitive instincts; but in the wilds, and above all in the high hills, he is feelingly reminded, at every turn, that creation is lord of him. Here he re-discovers Nature, the great pagan goddess, as men first knew her; a goddess to be wooed with high-handed courage; circumvented sometimes; conquered and captured—never. Here, where all is elemental, the man, at hand-grips with colossal forces, finds re-invigoration of mind and body; finds his soul threshed from the husks of materialism, self-indulgence, and the petty self-importance—fostered by civilization—that rots character as surely as damp rots wood. In this rough fashion the Frontier makes or breaks her pioneers, according to the grace that is in them; and her fashion, however terrible, has about it a certain grandeur conspicuously absent from the making or breaking process of cities.

So throughout the explosive heat of July, the little encampment zig-zagged down and down,—over a chaos of sand and shingle and boulder,—trailing in its wake a six-foot road that pleased the Sapper's critical eye and cheered him on. Finally, near the month's end, heat and thirst and weariness culminated at Ramghat,—known

among the officers as "the Devil's stoke-hole,"—a place unholy as the road that led to it. No vestige of green relieves the nakedness of that appalling gorge, through which the Astor races with the speed and thunder of an express. No vestige of life either, save on the far side a small military post of huts and caves, guarding the plank and twig-rope bridges whereon Gilgit depends for communion with the world. The rope bridge being in a perilous state of disrepair, Laurence had impounded a huge coil of telegraph wire lying idle at Bunji, and scraping together such odds and ends of timber as his men could lay hands on, had designed an impromptu substitute that would serve till more permanent connections were established between Kashmir and her most important outpost.

The week devoted to the making of that bridge was seared into Alan's memory for life. Cooped up between cliffs that breathed very fire, the mere physical misery of heat and thirst eclipsed every other sensation. But the bridge stood,—which was all that really mattered: and at the last he fared forth into the Indus valley exhausted, yet elate; while Vixen,—whose spirits were proof even against a week in an oven,—darted gleefully from rock-shadow to rock-shadow, raising miniature dust storms as she went. For her, exile held no terrors. Quite the reverse. In Peshawur, where superfluous humans abounded, her star had suffered partial eclipse. But here among the hills she was Queen Regent, and openly advertised her joy by means of eyes like brown pansies and a restless stump of a tail.

The main part of August was spent in a leisurely progress through the Valley of Stones, which for sheer immensity and desolation has few rivals on earth. Day after day the shadeless monotone of sand and shingle glared at the fierce ultramarine overhead; and an advance of six or eight miles wrought small change in the landscape. Always on the left hand the brown swirling Indus and the rock-wall of Gundai; ten thousand feet from boulder-strewn base to splintered crest. Always on the right, undulating waste and jagged sky-line; an endless procession of unnamed heights; bare bones of mountains, every mark of Nature's chisel clearly to be seen. The

vastness, the blank impersonality of it all lay like a dead weight upon heart and brain. Yet here, as elsewhere, there was balm in Gilead; for northward a group of Shining Ones gleamed like a tiara set above a stern and battered face; while Nanga Purbát lorded it over the South.

July had brought a brief but uplifting answer to his acknowledgement of the poems, that illumined his evenings when brain and body were not too earth-bound to respond. In them, and in her letters, he had found fanciful proof, as lovers will, that—husband or no—a part of her innermost self belonged to him only, by the divine right of mutual understanding. Dangerous doctrine; but the man was three parts human, and terribly alone. Lenox had written hopefully in August; and by the same mail had come a line from Finlay. Since then—nothing; and those who live in close touch with their kind cannot conceive what such gaps of silence mean to the exile in the wilds. As the month drew to an end, the sun's tyranny reached its climax; and a sharp attack of fever came to vary the daily round. Phenacetin, quinine, and the knowledge that time was growing precious kept Laurence on his feet; in defiance of a head that buzzed like a hive, and a rising temperature which he did not trouble to take. But when in due course it subsided Nature registered her protest by taking arbitrary charge of affairs, with Nawaz Khan for second in command. Sheer weakness prostrated mind and body; and Giant Despair sat beside him in the stifling tent, prophesying evil with a fiendish eye for probabilities.

But still the road moved on.

And all this while no word from Lyndsay who had exalted him by an impulse of kindness and then, it seemed, forgotten him altogether. He grew to hate the jangling bells of the *dák*-runner that heralded disappointment day after day.

At length, in the first week of September, came news from Peshawur; but not from her. By this time he was encamped within sight of Bunji plateau, where the first crop of corn was now in sheaf, where the red-gold fire of apricots burned and the vine festoons drooped under their load of fruit. Again, as always, he sat outside his tent at sundown, awaiting the event of the day, with a

hope that seven weeks of silence could not kill outright. This time it was a letter from Finlay—and he scanned its pages feverishly in search of one name.

Ah—there it was! And the next moment he clenched his teeth upon an oath.

Finlay had apologized for slackness in writing. "And I wonder if you have heard lately of Mrs. Videlle, either," he went on. "A little daughter was born five weeks ago, and Mrs. Rivers has been anxious over the mother's slow recovery. But there doesn't seem to be anything really wrong, and I hear the christening is coming off next week. I am to be godfather! What have you to say to that?"

Laurence had nothing to say, and the rest of the longed-for letter remained unread.

So that was the reason of her silence; the most natural reason on earth. "A less self-absorbed fool would have guessed it weeks ago," he concluded; chastising himself because unreasoning anger burned in him, and he had no shadow of right to chastise her. It was as if a door leading to deeper intimacy had been half opened, only to be slammed in his face; and until this moment he had not known how surprisingly the pain of loss had been mitigated by her evident need of his friendship; by belief that in some subtle fashion she relied on it—on him. And now—absorbed in this new marvel, what possible use could she have for such minor superfluities as the letters of a two months' acquaintance, whom she would probably never meet again?

That last thought set the blood drumming in his temples. The weakness of fever was not yet past; his brain was distorting facts and values as the brain will when the heart is intensely moved. So the devil of exaggeration tormented him into the belief that he had lost his dear dream-woman for ever; and in three months of heat, weariness, and isolation, he seemed to have only just discovered the real meaning of those words.

To-night the West flamed and died unheeded; but when a late moon slid softly up from behind the hills, Laurence rose with a stifled sound and went into his tent. The dead weight of his limbs vaguely puzzled him; and sinking into a chair he buried his face in his hands.

For a long while he sat thus, motionless, while fever and thwarted passion worked like a double poison in his blood. Then—dimly, yet unmistakably—there stole, through the blur of pain, a divine, incredible sense of healing. His pulses quickened as only one presence could quicken them; and out of the darkness came forth light—the light of her exceeding nearness, of her eyes trying to reach him; and at last the music of her voice breathing his name. No dream; for he was awake, —intensely, throbbingly awake; though scarcely daring to breathe, lest movement dispel the exquisite illusion of her spirit entering his own and irradiating it "from depth to pinnacle, from pinnacle to depth"; till certainty of her presence overwhelmed him, and he sprang to his feet with a great cry:—

"Lyndsay—Beloved!"—

For answer, blind walls of sun-baked canvas; a camp-bed, and a lamp dying for lack of oil. His arms, involuntarily outflung, fell heavily; and the cry of his heart in which passion, pleading, triumph had been strangely mingled, spent itself in the emptiness and darkness that were his portion.

An instant later Nawaz Khan's brown hand lifted the '*chick.*'

"The Sahib called?"

"No, confound you! Go to sleep, and let me alone," Laurence answered savagely, and blew out the lamp.

## CHAPTER XXI.

Ah what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life!
—MEREDITH.

AND while Laurence sat communing with his stricken heart, in the midst of Bunji's sun-saturate desolation, the woman, whose face and voice were about him like a living presence, lay alone on a wide couch under a flapping punkah, in the bungalow near Peshawur hospital, five hundred miles away. Alone; yet not all alone. Her left arm enfolded a white, formless bundle, stirred, just perceptibly, by the rhythmic breath of sleep—the fulfilment of that hope which had been a lantern unto her feet throughout the long, long months of waiting.

And now—?

For the moment, Lyndsay also seemed asleep. She lay without motion, her fine hair rippling to a knot low on her neck; the sweep of her lashes intensifying the pallor of cheeks blanched by such fierce heat as she had never known. Her tea-gown, a creamy filmy thing of silk and lace, was cut square at the throat; cascades of lace fell away from her arms; and a row of moonstones, on a hair-line silver chain, glimmered like great dewdrops with the rise and fall of her breast. No colour in all the picture but the coral of her lips, that drooped pathetically at the corners.

Yet her time of waiting had been the happiest she had known since the early months of marriage. Videlle's transition from the passionate to the devout lover had revived not only the memory of those unshadowed days, but an aftermath of the white fervour that had glorified them and him. Carrie had succumbed to the irresistible invitation—a six weeks' respite; and had ultimately been persuaded that Monty's health demanded a summer

in Murree; a persuasion gilded by Jim's unusual generosity in offering to secure rooms for them at a good hotel.

"I will take no verandah frocks, and I will cut them *oll* out, you may bet your hat!" she had declared oracularly on departure. "And *of* course I will come down for thee Boy's christening."

Lyndsay had been secretly amused at the way she and Jim seemed to take "the boy" for granted; yet she had made no comment. Her innate reticence on the subject held throughout.

And lo, when the days were accomplished—no man-child, but a daughter, pitifully small and frail, who—in those first hours of transient likeness after birth—had seemed a miniature of the young mother herself.

Videlle, even in the bitterness of disappointment, took faint comfort from the thought that a second Lyndsay had been born into the world. But with her it was otherwise. Son or daughter, the child was to be her crown of marriage; and her enclosed garden of dreams had never been shadowed by the fear that had surely visited a more practical woman. Not until the hidden hope had been made manifest did she realize how completely her cup of life was poisoned by the dark drop in her husband's blood, which she had willed to thrust out of thought, even, if possible, out of memory. Hence the cruel shock, followed by hours of numbed quiescence, wherein she had wrestled with a vague repulsion from this small strange being, who was a part of herself, and whose coming she had awaited with such exalted hope. But intense heat and the ache of disappointment had prevailed; for all the care lavished on her by Videlle and Monica Rivers she progressed slowly, almost reluctantly, toward health and strength.

By now, however, her will was reasserting itself in view of the christening, already twice postponed; and while she lay under the punkah seemingly asleep, she found herself hoping that, at the last, Carrie would shirk the journey and the fortnight of Peshawur heat. Since the child's birth, she had written only to Videlle—voluble condolences withheld from his wife, whose low spirits he attributed to the only conceivable cause, and respected accordingly. As for Lyndsay, apathy of mind and weak-

ness of body blurred her perceptions; and hindered those swift intuitions of her husband's moods that he took for reiterate proofs of love; hindered also her own inevitable awakening.

Faint sound and movement seemed to chide her oblivion of the new possession at her side. She stirred uneasily and opened her eyes. A film of lace shielded the tiny sleeper from mosquitos and the flapping of the punkah frill; and Lyndsay lifted it with cautious fingers. Pain showed in the faint compression of her lips; and in her eyes the half-worshipping wonder of the new-made mother, baulked of the rapture that is her inalienable right.

The fleeting likeness to herself had melted into the soft indeterminate curves of character in embryo. Above the puckered forehead a cloud of black hair—the dense uncompromising black of the East—seemed an ink blot on the prevailing whiteness. The eyes beneath their waxen lids were pools of shadow, and the rose-leaf skin of babyhood was dulled by an unmistakable tinge, painfully reminiscent of the wheat-coloured babies of the North. In vain Lyndsay argued that dark hair and eyes mattered nothing after all. Knowledge of their inner significance haunted her; knowledge that the moods, the shiftiness, the vacillations, that so irrevocably divided her from her husband, were almost certainly re-incarnate in his child. Yes—his; indubitably his. Yet through all the months of promise "My child" had been the whispered talisman of heart. Unthinkingly, as women sometimes will, she had half lost sight of the giver in the gift; and now behold her punishment!

A ripple of emotion disturbed the brooding stillness of her face; and stooping, she touched the satin-soft cheek with tremulous lips. "Oh Baby," she breathed. "And I *wanted* you so!" Tears of weakness sprang to her eyes; but at the sound of movements without she brushed them aside.

It was the bearer with the evening post. He handed her two envelopes on a tray, slitting them with a penknife at her command. On one she recognized Laurence's writing; and a flush of pure pleasure crept into her face as she drew out two closely written sheets.

For ten absorbing minutes she forgot heat, heartache,

even the new life pillowed on her arm. For ten absorbing minutes she felt the presence of gaunt, overwhelming mountains, pearl-grey and black beneath a rising moon; heard the unceasing voice of the Indus as it swept past that dust-coloured speck of a tent in the Valley of Stones. In reading these letters from the wilds she was apt to let imagination have its way with her; a habit that conspired with Laurence's photos and letters to make the Indus Valley, in all its forbidding majesty, a place of strange reality that her vagrant spirit could visit at will. And now—lying with closed eyes—her spirit passed into the lamp-lit tent; saw the man himself at his writing-table; the broad shoulders and strongly modelled head bowed forward—writing? No. As vision grew clearer she discovered that his elbows were on the table, his face hidden; his whole attitude a cry of dejection and loneliness unspeakable.

Involuntarily her lips formed his name. "Mr. Laurence —what is it?" she whispered; and the low sound roused her to reality; to the maddening ministrations of the punkah, and the open letter in her hand.

"I wonder if he heard me?" was her fantastic thought as she slipped it under the pillow. "And I wonder when I shall see him again—in the flesh." That she had just truly seen him in the spirit, she did not doubt. "And there is never a note of complaint in his letters," she added with an unwarrantable throb of pride. "One can only read the awful loneliness between the lines."

Then she remembered her second lettter, and a glance at it banished the hero of the Indus Valley from her mind. Carrie! She unfolded the sheet with a silent prayer for excuses and apologies; and the first three lines set anxiety at rest. Carrie was not coming—merciful reprieve! But it took time to decipher the tangle of reasons and condolences set forth in her sprawling, illegible hand. And during the process Lyndsay's eyes lost their softness—the dewdrops on her throat quivered uncertainly and the blood burned in her cheeks. For Carrie, after one page of platitudes, had succumbed to the old, irresistible luxury of "having her say out." Jim or no Jim, she could not and would not for ever live up to his insane craze for keeping Lyndsay and her sensibilities wrapped in cotton wool.

"Why ever on earth," Carrie asked herself, should not this porcelain divinity be allowed to realize that she had failed signally in a wife's first duty to her husband? That was Carrie's Oriental way of looking at it. Some instinct told her that Lyndsay would not see it so, unless it were brought home to her. And why should it not be brought home to her? Who was *she*, Carrie would like to know, that she should disappoint Jim and be let off scot free? For even the most inglorious soul has its unexpected points of light; and a perverted sense of loyalty to Jim sanctified his sister's most spiteful attacks upon his wife. But in this case spite and loyalty were submerged in the primitive woman's triumph over another's failure. The more so, since that failure made just amends for the heart-burnings she had suffered from Lyndsay's unobtrusive fine-breeding, from her effortless supremacy over Jim and others, by reason of that superlatively feminine charm which is most subduing when most subdued. Hence just cause for triumph. And in Carrie's eyes that was not triumph that hid its light under a bushel. Bushels were for fools. She preferred to set her candle on a hill; or better still, to flourish it like a torch in presence of the vanquished.

Thus all through her ill-spelt, ill-bred effusion the flame of it flickered, plain to see; leading Lyndsay through mystification and amaze to the natural anger of the Englishwoman who does not hold the key to the Eastern point of view. Delight in masculine companionship had led her to hope for a son; but that a daughter's advent should be considered a disaster, bordering on disgrace, roused all her pride of womanhood, and rekindled that instinctive recoil from the East and its ways which she had so fruitlessly striven to overcome.

Nor was this all. Carrie's triumph, in the guise of condolence, though it might make her wince, was in itself a vulgar triviality, beneath contempt. One fact alone gave it tragic significance. Lyndsay saw it suddenly as a flashlight upon her husband's mind, and heart. Carrie had practically written what Jim was too considerate to say. As conviction gained on her the blood mounted to her temples. Between his prejudice and hers she saw her child as an insignificant morsel of life, debarred

from the worshipful love that is the divine right of babyhood. It needed only this, that others should fail as she had failed, to fan the living spark of motherhood to a flame that burnt up all disabilities and disappointments once and for all.

A quavering cry from the bundle on her arm came like a direct appeal to the new force astir within her; and in a passion of yearning, protecting love, she leaned over her child, gathering it close, cradling the soft dark head in the nook of her bosom. Then because her normal strength was not yet returned, the tears that were in her heart welled up and overflowed—tears wrung from her poignant sense of the pity and perversity of it all. Carrie's spiteful effusion, in breaking up her apathy, had broken up also the great deeps of emotion that for six weeks had been frozen at their source. Suppressed sobs shuddered through her; and in her momentary abandonment to grief, Videlle's light footstep without passed unheard; nor was she aware of him till his hand touched her shoulder, till his voice, anxious and imperative, startled her back to self-control.

"My darling little woman, this isn't like you. What on earth's gone wrong?"

She drew in a short sobbing breath. "Jim! You startled me!"

"I'm sorry. But you startled *me*, my dear. What's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing. What brought you home so early?"

"A mere chance. And I'm glad I came. No wonder you get on slowly if you upset yourself like this."

"I don't upset myself. It was only to-day—"

A fretful wail interrupted her, and again she leaned over her treasure, with murmurs of endearment. Videlle stood by frowning. This also was a fresh departure. Anxiety made him irritable; and as the protesting voice wailed louder, he stooped and touched his wife.

"Look here, Lyn, if the child's going to be a nuisance, you must send her away."

Lyndsay flashed a reproachful look at him and tightened her hold.

"She's *not* a nuisance—and I want her."

"So I see. But just at present *I* want *you*."

Before she could answer he had shouted for "Nurse Sahib"; and with a last lingering kiss—a mute plea for forgiveness—Lyndsay yielded up the child.

Then while Videlle gave some low-toned orders to the woman, she lay breathing unsteadily, with closed eyes. He turned back in haste, eager for explanation; but her changed aspect shamed his mood of irritable curiosity. Emotion he understood and could deal with in his own fashion. Her self-repression, her moments of spiritual aloofness, baffled him always. And now, as he stood awed into silence by her exceeding whiteness and stillness, she seemed less than ever a creature of earth. But determination to know the cause of her tears remained; and passing a light hand over her hair, he knelt down at her side.

"Darling," he said gently, and she opened her eyes.

"Yes?"

"You never answered my question."

"How rude of me!"

"Very rude!—But you must, you know. I'm your doctor as well as your husband. There's some worry pulling you back; and how am I to get you strong again if you shut me out of your confidence?"

"Dear, don't put it that way," she pleaded. "If I did tell you it would do no good—to either of us."

"It's to do with *me*, then? Not the child? I thought—"

"What did you think?"

But in caressing the frill of her sleeve his eye had lighted on an envelope in a familiar hand.

"Carrie—? By Jove, I might have guessed she was at the bottom of it. Not coming, is she?"

"No."

"That's a mercy!" He covered the letter with his hand. "I may read it?"

"I'd rather not. It would only vex you—to no purpose."

"But if I insist?"

"Oh, of course—if you insist—!"

And he read it, while she lay watching every flicker that crossed his face. Certainly he was vexed; though not as she had been. That her sensitive soul divined.

With an oath, he crumpled up the offending sheet and thrust it into his pocket.

"Confounded cheek!—And I shall tell her so. Writing to *you* in that tone of voice. No wonder you were upset."

"Oh, it wasn't her tone of voice," murmured truthful Lyndsay. "I'm hardened to that now."

"Well then?"

Her eyes challenged his for an instant.

"Don't you know? Can't you understand? It was her reason for not troubling to come." She spoke low and vehemently. "I want *no* condolences from anyone. Of course I hoped—for a son. All the same—I'm proud to have brought a woman into the world. And you ought to be proud too. But I suppose—I might have known—"

She checked herself on the edge of a precipice; and Videlle, who had been studying the carpet, turned his head sharply. Apprehension routed dismay. The old haunting fear, long dead or sleeping, sprang suddenly to life.

"*What* might you have known?"

"Only—that you and I are doomed not to think alike."

He searched her face with a gaze that drew blood to the surface.

"That wasn't it, Lyndsay," he said quietly, and her deepening blush quickened suspicion to conviction. "We seem to have been living at cross purposes since the child came. I saw you were downhearted and drew the natural conclusion. But if you are—proud and satisfied, as you say, then there must be something else. I thought—I hoped we had done with difficulties and misunderstandings. But of course if you won't be straight with me—"

"I straight with *you?*" she echoed, the quiver of tears in her voice. "Oh Jim—are you—have you always been—straight with me?"

The words came slowly as if wrung from her; and with an incoherent sound he got upon his feet. "What—exactly—do you mean by that?" he asked hoarsely;

"Jim—you know. You must know. Will you force me to put it into words?"

"Certainly not. But—how much do *you* know? That's what I want to get at."

"Quite enough to realize how little of the truth you saw fit to tell me about—your mother."

It was his turn to feel the blood tingle in his face. The futility of attempting self-defence struck him speechless; and with an abrupt movement he thrust both hands into his pockets. In spite of a thermometer over ninety they had grown suddenly cold. Then he began to wonder; and wonder unsealed his lips.

"But—how did you find out? You've seen hardly anyone, except Mrs. Rivers. Was it her?"

She drew him nearer by the edge of his coat.

"Don't distress yourself, dear. It's quite an old story now."

"Old? Since when?"

"Since last November."

"Good God!" he breathed in stunned amazement. "But who—how?"

"Quite accidentally. Through a stranger."

"And you stuck to me. You never said a word! Lyn, you're an angel!"

He was back on his knees beside her now, moisture on his lashes, her two hands in his own. She shook her head with a tender smile for his exaggeration.

"What did you imagine I should do—if I ever did find out?"

"I don't know. I was half afraid—you might leave me."

"I—I very nearly did."

"Lyndsay!" Her small hands were crushed in his. "What prevented you?"

"I suppose the realization that two wrongs have never yet made a right."

He looked disappointed. A woman's reason should surely have been more personal.

"You must have hated me pretty well—to think of going."

"I did—for a time." The memory of it all swept through her like an icy wind. "Oh Jim," she mur-

mured, "you ought to have told me—You ought indeed!—"

"And if I had, would you still have married me?"

"I can't tell. Perhaps not."

"Then I regret nothing, except—the fact itself. Did you hate that, Lyn? D'you hate it still?"

He pressed nearer; and she, in self-defence, sank deeper among her cushions, with closed eyes and the faintest tremor of her delicate upper lip.

"Dearest, don't rake it all up again," she pleaded. "Whatever I may have felt or thought about it has been put behind me long ago. Haven't I proved that—all these months?"

She lifted her lashes on the question, that he might take comfort and assurance from the sincerity of her eyes; and in a passionate impulse he stooped and kissed her.

"But just now," he added gently. "It has been worrying you again—eh?"

"You are too keen altogether!" she rebuked him smiling. "It's a terrible thing to be married to a doctor! That was only—a passing foolishness, about Baby; and I've put it behind me too. It's not her fault, poor darling. And she needs all my love and—pride if she is to get none from you."

"It's not quite as bad as that," he said lightly; but his face betrayed him. "It was an unfortunate start. But perhaps—better luck—next time."

"Next time—oh—!"

He had taken her unawares; and to his quickened perceptions that startled monosyllable revealed the full extent of her "passing foolishness"; revealed the—to him—incredible fact that for all her gift of motherhood, she had been driven to hope that there might never be a "next time."

"Oh good Lord—!" he murmured in bewildered annoyance, and was on his feet before she could rectify her slip. "It seems to me," he added in a changed voice, "that the process of 'putting it all behind you' is not yet quite complete."

She flushed deeply at the implied reproach and answered nothing. Only as he turned to go, she held out a hand.

"Jim, don't make me regret having told you the truth. Don't in your perverse moods credit me with thoughts and feelings that are done with long ago."

"I'll try not to," he answered unappeased. "But you're better not talking any more just now. I'll give you some phenacetin and you must get half an hour's rest before dinner."

She watched him go with an aching foreknowledge of the fatal skill with which he would convert his discovery into a two-edged sword that would wound both himself and her.

## CHAPTER XXII.

> **Leave not, my soul, the unfoughten field,**
> **Thy debts dishonoured; nor thy place desert**
> **Without due service rendered.**
>
> —R. L. S.

"*Hazúr*—"

"Well, what fool's talk now? I am busy."

There was irritability in the Englishman's tone; but Nawaz Khan—himself prone to explosive speech—accepted it without resentment.

"I have laid the Sahib's tea in the shadow of the tent. Your Honour hath been many hours in the sun to-day; and our quinine draweth to an end."

Concern so genuine had disarmed a less human-hearted man.

"The foolishness is mine, oh Nawaz Khan!" Laurence answered smiling.

"*Hazúr!* Speak not thus. It was only—"

"Only that thou hast turned Doctor Sahib of late; and it is now my business to obey orders! Well—I come!"

The two men stood by a mass of tumbled rock on the edge of that historic Gilgit road, where all day long an ever-swelling stream of coolies, mules and *dák*-runners flowed north and south; for the air was full of war and rumours of war, and a distraught Colonel in Kashmir was moving earth and heaven to get some portion of the necessary grain and stores and ammunition across the passes while yet there was time. No light undertaking, in face of the fact that this summer, by way of mending matters, the Kashmir Durbar had consigned all supply arrangements for the Force to a big Punjab contractor, sublimely ignorant of the country: and in four months on the road Laurence had seen and heard enough to anticipate failure on a scale commensurate with the task in hand; in which case Lenox would find additional

troops a burden rather than a blessing, even in the event of war.

Only a week of September now remained; and October once begun, the first big snowfall might shut out the world till June. Already postal arrangements were disorganised; no *dâk*-runners having passed up from the south for days.

Lenox had not written; and by now Laurence was anxiously expecting news of his arrival in Kashmir plus substantial reinforcements. For this reason, and because of the numbed sense of loss that had persisted since the coming of that letter from Peshawur, he had been recklessly over-working himself for the past fortnight; and although on the heights autumn was fast giving place to winter, here in the valley summer died hard, and the sun had lost none of his pristine power to smite. Hence intermittent fever, and Nawaz Khan's anxiety in respect of quinine.

The corner where the two men stood commanded an ample stretch of the road, emerging at this point from a deep ravine and descending to the Indus, where flat-bottomed boats and a couple of rafts plied precariously back and forth across three hundred yards of racing water, churned into an ominous rough and tumble of breakers by hidden islands of rock. A suspension bridge from England, promised months ago, had never arrived; and Laurence had set his heart on achieving a reliable substitute before the troops reached Bunji. Part of the invaluable coil of wire sent up from Ramghat had been set aside for a winter causeway over the Gilgit; and his men had, with difficulty, collected odds and ends of timber enough for both.

Pure joy, this phase of the work. Bridges had been his specialty from the start; and there was a thrill in the prospect of harnessing this giant among rivers, that neither heartache nor fever could annul. To reach the Indus, and have his bridge well in hand before the month ended, that was his present ambition, and fulfilment seemed already in sight.

Glad of a brief respite from the traffic and clamour of the road, he returned, "by order," to the shady side of his tent, where Nawaz Khan—whisking three dusters

from three plates of fruit and biscuits—left him to the soothing influences of tea and a cigar. And while he enjoyed these, as only the hard worker can, his thoughts hovered insistently about the one great event that loomed upon the near horizon,—portentous, thrilling—the probable campaign. Would it come off? Would Lenox get his troops through to Gilgit soon enough to avert complications threatened by Rumour, the one swift traveller through these inhospitable hills. Secrecy, he knew, was the first requisite of success. The least suspicion in Hunza, or among the Cossacks promenading the Pamirs, that hostile preparations were in progress, might bring the Russians across the Hindu Kush, or precipitate an attack on Chalt Fort, which—like every place in the district—was fast running short of supplies. From a belated paper Laurence had learnt that the Indian Government had decided to strengthen the Agent's Bodyguard at Gilgit. No date of departure had been given: and between anxiety for Lenox, his own private heartache, and the depression inseparable from fever, the glad wholesome spirit of the man suffered temporary eclipse.

By this time he could acknowledge exaggeration in the sense of loss wrought by the news from Peshawur. Yet—in spite of himself, in spite of the spiritual visitation, which had exalted and bewildered him for days—the feeling persisted that this new event relegated him and his friendship to the mass of pleasant trivialities that form the background of life. And because it is of the essence of love to spurn half measures, the heart of Alan Laurence demanded that he should count for something definite in her existence, or—drop out of it altogether. At present, the latter alternative seemed nearer the mark. For although he had succeeded, after the first, in shutting out thought of her husband, some uncomprehended quality in himself, or her, made thought of her apart from the child a thing impossible. Perhaps, in time, the disability would pass; but sooner than admit the intruder he had banished himself from his Elysium of the heart. And sitting alone outside the gate of Paradise is not an inspiriting occupation.

Finlay's news had been followed by a pencil note from Lyndsay, thanking him for his letter without

mention of the vision it had brought her; and telling him, simply, of the new joy that had come into her life. But a word from her—blest advent though it be—was powerless to cancel facts; and feeling quite unable to answer in his former vein, Laurence had finally decided on no answer at all. Blocked passes and the campaign would account for the cessation of letters; and probably, within a few months, the interlude of their friendship would have become an attractive memory—no more. For him there remained only redoubled concentration on the road; and, his cigar ended, he went back to his post beside the rocks.

But Nawaz Khan had been right about the sun. A splitting headache sent him early to bed; though quenchless thirst and eyeballs like hot coals precluded all hope of rest. Fitful dozings were broken, again and again, by one recurrent nightmare of advancing troops, and a final stretch of road that grew under his hands, with miraculous speed, only to crumble into ruins just as the column came in sight. The suspense and culminating horror of each collapse were real enough to induce exhaustion, which towards dawn plunged him into unrefreshing sleep; and Nawaz Khan—lying on guard across the parted tent flaps—forebore to wake him at the appointed time.

But Nature—intent on her own affairs—was less considerate; and, before eight, Laurence was startled into consciousness by the shuddering boom of an explosion followed by a roar as of distant artillery.

In the space of a heart-beat he was out of bed; out of the tent; and lo, the nightmare of the morning eclipsed all the visionary horrors of sleep! Behind him a deep narrow nullah cut a passage into the higher hills; and now from the heart of it a surging mass of rock and boulder and liquid mud came thundering down towards the camp, where all was bustle and confusion—falling tents, flying coolies, shouts and yells of distracted men. Laurence saw at a glance what had happened. A glacier lake in the heights must have broken; and the volume of water, suddenly released, was bringing down the hill.

No time for consternation. It was a matter of seconds; and at best much must be lost. His thoughts flew instantly to the priceless coils of telegraph wire.

"This way first men!" he shouted as he ran. But both wire and timber were disastrously ill placed; and, even at the risk of many lives, the lesser coil only could be hauled away before the vast volume of mud and stones swept past, annihilating the rest in one breath.

Too stunned to feel the full force of the blow, Laurence sped back to his tent in pursuit of personal treasures. Here Nawaz Khan, with his turban half unrolled, was breathlessly thrusting books, boots, instruments, pell mell, into a canvas bag; and his master slipping on a flannel coat joined the desperate race for life. Impossible to limit the danger zone; impossible to tell how many days' work would be wrecked. They could but do their utmost; and that at lightning speed.

And all the while the grinding roar went on. Great cubes of rock, ten and fifteen feet high, came crashing and leaping downward, through the onrush of black slime, that flung them this way and that like a handful of pebbles. Within five minutes that which had been the camping-ground was blotted out by an ever-widening stream of ink, sweeping rocks and stones, and every obstacle in its path, on toward the river; while the men standing among their scattered belongings, looked on in mingled fascination and fear. Then, even as speed and volume lessened, a second avalanche came hurtling downward; tons of granite and loosened earth, filling up the mouth of the nullah to a height of thirty feet.

By this time the original stream had joined the Indus, whose ink-suffused waters thundered on with added violence; by this time, too, the stunned and startled humans had sufficiently recovered their breath to set about evolving order from the chaos, and estimating the damage done. But Laurence, the race for safety over, stood like a man petrified, awaiting the end:—which was not yet.

Thrice the chasm yielded its hideous offspring; and upon the third down-rush,—most terrific of all,—the sides of the nullah itself crashed in; while a deafening explosion told of some big fall, in higher regions, that appeared to have dammed up the stream. And after the explosion, a silence, as of sudden death; the black slime oozing

leisurely through countless crevices; the last, most trying stretch of the road, converted into a causeway of rock and debris ten feet deep.

Seven days' work wiped out in half an hour; a goodly tale of tents, instruments, and bags of gunpowder swept bodily into the river; and—cruellest loss of all—the pile of wood and wire, for the bridge that was to have crowned his summer's task.

Such is India: land of great catastrophies and great achievements; a land that demands of the Englishmen who serve her, all their idealism and all their strength; and in the bitterness of the moment the Sapper's heart seemed emptied of both. With a curse he turned away his eyes from beholding the disaster, and entered his newly erected tent.

The hours of unremitting toil, that followed, repaired less than a tithe of that which Nature had destroyed as unconcernedly as a child might deface an elaborate work of art; and not until dusk denied him the relief of action did the morning's calamity penetrate into the recesses of Alan's brain. By then he could no longer ignore the fever that devoured him like a flame. Flinging himself into his deck chair, he lay with closed eyes feigning sleep, while Nawaz Khan laid a light meal of eggs and fruit, supplemented by the evening's *dák*, and stole noiselessly out.

Insatiable thirst roused Laurence, at last, from semi-stupor; and emptying his long tumbler twice over, he sat forward, his head between his hands, staring fixedly at nothing in particular. The blood buzzing in his ears sounded like a far-off mud-flow that no power on earth could check; while the nightmares of sleep and waking whirled confusedly in his brain. His one coherent sensation was an overwhelming weariness. For all his youth and vitality, he was sick to the soul of battling against unequal odds; sick of the ceaseless rush of torrential rivers, and the harsh enclosing heights with their aspect of almost terrific inattention; sick, no less, of the struggle within, than of the blank heart-emptiness that now reigned in its stead. To what end had a ruthless Fate thrust upon him a love imperishable as it was impossible? Pride and conscience still resented the fact,

as at the first; but no amount of resentment could set back the hands upon the dial of life.

And through all his vague tumult of blood and brain the Devil's whisper "*cui bono*" seemed urging him, with fiendish insistence, toward the one obvious cure for life's manifold ills. But at the first hint of temptation the ingrained courage of the man was up in arms. The sane and simple religious belief—none the less real because it lay below the horizon line of speech—forbade all thought of tampering with the laws of life and death. If an enemy chanced to do him that service, if his first *bona fide* campaign should prove to be his last—well and good. A soldier could ask no better finale. If not—!

Of a sudden his brain cleared; and he found himself confronted by his revolver case, that crowned a pile of books near his bed.

"Damn the thing!" he muttered irritably. "What possessed that fool of a bearer to put it there?"

Then he sat gazing at it abstractedly, for many minutes, as at a familiar friend, seen suddenly in a new light. The average soldier accepts his revolver as he accepts his boots and helmet and other items of his kit; but the man who owns an imagination is always liable to attacks of mental lucidity, when the veil of the commonplace is rent, and facts, the meanest or most familiar, rouse unexpected trains of thought. So now, for the first time, Laurence regarded his revolver with a certain awe; marvelling that so small a weapon should have power, in one breath, to wreck the intricate mechanism of his own great frame, and solve the supreme problem of the body's relation to the soul. It was such a dangerously simple method of slipping the burden from tired shoulders. One movement of his forefinger would suffice; and after—the brand of coward upon an honoured name, for desertion in the day of the battle.

He wrenched himself free from the degrading thought, amazed at its persistence. The fever must be going to his head; and in any case it might be as well to thrust so evilly eloquent a companion out of sight. Dragging himself up, he crossed to the bed; but, in grasping the revolver, he started, listening intently. Swift footsteps, not Asiatic, were nearing the tent; and even as he turned,

the lifted flap revealed an Englishman, in rough shooting kit, whose fine-featured face seemed oddly familiar.

"Well, I'm shot!" he broke out in amazement. "Who the devil are you?"

"My name's Desmond," the face answered smiling.

"Desmond?—The V. C.?"

"Just so."

"Thought I knew you. The Colonel has a portrait of you at the Agency. But what blessed chance brought you here?"

"News of the landslip. By a stroke of luck, I got permission to shoot in the Astor nullahs, and rode on to Bunji for a sight of the Indus Valley. Heard of your catastrophe the minute I got there, and came straight on to see if I could help at all. I've brought some kit and a sleeping-bag on the chance."

"How stunning of you!" A sudden sense of losing foothold made him grasp the back of a chair, and reminded him of the revolver case in his right hand. "Looks as if you had come just in time to save me from blowing out my brains!" he added with a forced laugh. "But I take my oath you'd have found me at work to-morrow morning. I only got up—to put the beastly thing away."

Desmond's answering smile revealed the man.

"Quite a superfluous precaution!" he said lightly. Give me 'the beastly thing', and come and sit down. You've got fever on you. That's half the trouble."

And taking Laurence by the arm, he led him back to the chair.

"Lie quiet there while I shout for dinner. I'm infernally hungry, and you've not had a morsel, I'll swear. What's this?" He lifted the metal cover.—"Poached eggs—stone cold! No use at all. And a couple of letters, not opened. I call that ungrateful."

Laurence held out a hand, "Letters are there? I never even looked." And the admission was more significant than he realized. He turned them over listlessly; then jerked himself upright.

"The Colonel, at last, thank God. Probably just leaving Kashmir."

"More than doubtful!" Desmond reassured him promptly, while Nawaz Khan removed the condemned

eggs. "He'll be in luck if he's out of Simla yet. He's booked me for the campaign, you know, hearing I was on the spot; and he wrote, ten days ago, to say there seemed little chance of escape before the month was up. Go ahead, please.—Let's hear the latest."

And Laurence, sinking back into the chair, read the latest with an anxious crease between his brows.

"Bad business," he said at last. "Looks as if the Fates were against us all round. No getting away till the 30th; but he expects to reach Astor, troops and all, by the 12th."

Desmond nodded. "Trust Lenox for doing what he expects to do, unless Burzil, the treacherous, betrays him. The coolies report snow there already, and the weather-wise prophecy an abnormally early winter. But worry's the thief of strength; and it'll be time enough to cross our bridges when we reach 'em."

Laurence groaned. "Oh Lord, Major, don't talk of bridges! All the stuff for mine's gone to Hell; and I meant to start spanning the Indus next week!"

"My dear fellow—!" A strong grip on his shoulder conveyed the rest. "Not a scrap of it saved?"

"A small coil of telegraph wire. No mortal use."

"Wait till your brain's a bit cooler. You'll fix up something with it in no time. But here's food, thank Heaven! And when it's done, I clap you into bed and keep you there the best part of a week! I want to meet old Lenox at Astor. But I can stay till the 7th, and keep things going under your direction. I shall enjoy playing Sapper for a change. All you need do is get quit of the fever, and sit at the receipt of inspirations regarding that despised coil of telegraph wire!"

He did not think it necessary to mention his dream of a flying trip into Kashmir, where his wife and two children awaited a possible glimpse of him before Gilgit claimed him for the winter. He would write her an account of the disaster; and Honor could be trusted to approve and understand.

Laurence, hardly able to credit his senses, let his lids fall, in a luxury of weariness and relief.

"Upon my soul, Major, you're the kindest man I've ever met."

Desmond held a tumbler to his lips.

"Drink this, like a good chap," he said gently, "and let me get to my dinner. Your opinion on any subject to-night is not worth a foot of your own iron wire!"

But twelve days later Laurence reiterated his opinion with the sane enthusiasm of a mind and body restored to equipoise. For Theo Desmond had been better than his word. His magnetic vitality and manifest enjoyment of a new form of work had infected the whole camp, Laurence more than all; and in long hours of quiescence the required inspiration had come to life. Measurements and calculations revealed just enough material in hand for a flying bridge over the Indus; an ingenious contrivance that would at least save time and labour, and cheat the formidable ferry of its prey.

The moment Desmond gave consent, he spent his days down by the river directing operations, till a stout rope of wire ran from bank to bank, and a flat ferry boat, destined to travel along it by connecting wires, lay ready for the trial trip. Laurence, standing by Desmond at the water's edge, surveyed his achievement with a true craftsman's joy in the latest-born.

"Great, isn't it?" he queried simply. "Won't the Colonel be delighted! And but for *you*, Major, I should never have found the heart to think it out, or carry it through."

Desmond smiled, not ill-pleased. "Lucky I dropped in at the psychological moment!"

"Luckier still you had the human kindness to stay on! I'm not likely to forget this fortnight in a hurry. Come along now, Major; you and I are going to show 'em how."

The trial trip proved an unqualified success. Guided by the wire the boat sped triumphantly across, to the amazement of the first privileged passengers—a fair-skinned family of natives returning to their home in the wilds after a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Ghulam Bux and his men enjoyed extra rations in honour of the occasion; and Desmond's farewell dinner that night—a *burra khana* specially designed by Nawaz Khan—was a feast of good things more to be desired than

food—good fellowship, good spirits and good hope for the winter ahead. News, during the past fortnight, had been scanty and disquieting enough; but both men, being of the right mettle, heard with a responsive thrill the preliminary thunder-rolls of coming storm; noted with satisfaction the steadily increasing traffic along the Road of War; and at parting drank to a speedy reunion, culminating in Hunza's downfall before the year was out.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

The gods hear men's hands before their lips,
And heed, beyond all light of sacrifice,
Light of things done, and noise of labouring men.
—SWINBURNE.

"Colonel Sahib, the guides are confounded by reason of the darkness. It is no longer possible to advance."

"Possible or not—we go forward. Bring the guides to me."

The eternal antiphon of Asiatic and Briton in India; and upon this wild October evening, of snow and wind and deepening dark, it seemed as though the Asiatic were justified, and the Briton a victim to the dogged obstinacy of his race. Since dawn Eldred Lenox, with Max Richardson, Finlay, and a small detachment of troops, had been forcing a pathway through miles of new-fallen snow, ankle deep at the shallowest; and by sundown legions of blue-black cloud heralding storm had set him denouncing Kashmir's unpardonable negligence in respect of rest houses by the way. For two years he had urged the crying need of them, in season and out of season; but in the East life is cheap; and it was a matter of serene indifference to the Kashmir Durbar that, for lack of shelter, scores of men and animals died yearly of cold or frost-bite; that now, on the eve of a campaign, valuable lives might be deliberately sacrificed to official dilatoriness and personal spite.

Finlay's sepoys, unused to high altitudes, were suffering severely. A night in the open—and such a night!—meant risk of several fatalities; and, humanity apart, Lenox could not afford to lose a single unit of a force already too small for his needs. Remained only the confusion and discouragement of retreat, or a desperate plunge forward into the grey and white blur of darkness, on the chance of striking a village that lay hidden somewhere in the whirling depths; how far on not a man of

them could tell. Snow and darkness had obliterated all landmarks, and it was impossible to calculate how much ground they had covered since crossing the Pass. But, for Lenox, retreat was unthinkable; which fact he conveyed to his guides in half a dozen straight-flung words; and the Kashmiris, having suffered aforetime from this bewildering idiosyncrasy of Sahib-dom, reluctantly owned that one among them had an inkling of the direction in which the village lay.

"Though as to the distance, *Hazúr*—"

"Go ahead," Lenox commanded sharply, "and keep your wits about you.—Now then Finlay, we're off again, thank God."

Off again, in the teeth of stinging snow flakes and a wind that laughed great-coats to scorn; slipping, stumbling, urging on the numbed and despairing men; till even the British Officers lost heart and hope. Then—when it seemed that mere leg-weariness would settle the question of bivouacking in the snow—a sudden halt; a shout from the foremost guides: "Lights ahead, brothers! Praise Allah—we be saved!"

And within half an hour the nightmare journey had gone to swell the record of things accomplished in defiance of that poor-spirited word—impossible.

For the men, at least, shelter and warm food—of a kind—were forthcoming; for the baggage ponies—neither. Patient burden-bearers of Empire—they had tramped all day without a meal; and must needs stand all night in the same predicament, while the prodigal heavens lavished their sum of more on that which had too much. Dawn revealed them, frosted with silver, a foot of snow piled on their saddles; their noses exploiting its chill moisture for possible tufts of grass, which did not appear to be forthcoming. And among the scores of witnesses to their plight none were genuinely moved to pity save the three Englishmen, whose command of language, backed by rupees, eventually secured them a square meal.

As for Lenox, his first thought had but re-echoed his last: —What of the detachments behind? What of the eleven hundred coolie loads of ammunition, pay for troops, and scores of other necessaries, massed at Bandipur awaiting the return of ponies and coolies from the north? If the

Burzil had so nearly checked his own advance, how would they fare who came after? He had squandered three days at Srinagar in vain efforts to convince the authorities that failure of transport and commissariat would paralyze his operations and entail serious loss to the State. An approaching Viceregal visit dwarfed such minor considerations as food for the troops, or a possible campaign; and again, as aforetime, Lenox found himself thrown upon his own resources, with all his garrisons short of supplies, and a probable war on his hands into the bargain.

But not until he reached Astor did the full scope of Kashmir's talent for mismanagement stand revealed. Here the distracted Punjabi, in charge of the transport, sat resignedly, "waiting for orders," while *maunds* of grain that should long ago have reached Gilgit lay piled up in masses; for the coolie-famine was sore in the land. Here also he was greeted by fresh rumours of the intended attack on Chalt; but of reliable information, not one word. The postal service had caught the prevailing epidemic; and for ten days no letters had come through from the north. Notwithstanding all his efforts the position this year seemed worse than the year before. Yet facts must be faced and emergencies met, be they never so disconcerting; and at least one gleam struck through the gloom. Desmond was there to greet him; the man, of all others, best fitted to share the burden of responsibility resting on his shoulders. For in spite of accusations to the contrary no soldier, worthy of the name, embarks lightly upon the stern and terrible game of war. In this case fighting seemed almost inevitable, and sound policy into the bargain; but even until the eleventh hour Lenox would use all legitimate means to avoid it. He had returned charged with an ultimatum from the Indian Government to the effect that the safety of our Frontier line necessitated the rebuilding of Chalt Fort, and the establishment of a practicable road through Hunza-Nagar to keep the passes over the Hindu Kush. The "great Kings" were to be assured that free access to their country would in no way affect its internal management; but, as loyal allies, the Government would expect their help in strengthening its first line of defence; while active objection would be answered by an advance in force.

"And if I know anything of their Majesties that message spells—war," Lenox concluded, emphasizing the last word with the bowl of his pipe.

It was the night of his arrival at Astor; and, escaping as soon as might be from after-dinner convivialities, he had carried off Desmond to the Spartan-looking room prepared for him in the Fort. Nothing like a talk with Theo to disperse fogs and forebodings; and the man's answer showed the mellowing effect of the years upon his temperament of flame.

"So best—I venture to think. It's the fashion in these hypersensitive days to denounce war as an unconditional evil; and supposing that's true—which I'll never admit—its a finer form of evil than a dozen others which peace-mongers condone. Gentlemen of that persuasion forget that war has made most things worth the having. It certainly makes *men*, even if it eliminates a few in the process; and life's a costly affair all along the line. In this case surely it will be a sound thing for the Frontier if the Rajahs do show fight; and as for our chances of success—well, you're in command—!"

"For the first time, Theo," Lenox answered, with a smile for the implied compliment. "And uncomfortably aware of the fact that scores of lives, to say nothing of big political issues, depend upon my fallible skill and judgment. I'm apt to take things hard, as you know; and what with muddles and delays at every turn, I find the whole business no light weight for one pair of shoulders."

Desmond nodded feelingly.

"I'm here to go shares as far as I may, old chap. It's the price we pay for advancement; and sometimes one envies the boys, who can enjoy the thrill of action to the top of their bent, untroubled by the bogies of Cause and Result; as you and I did in the golden age! But after all Eldred, we can do no more than our level best; and, if it comes to fighting, hit out for all we're worth."

"Quite so. Only we've to get there first, bag and baggage—especially baggage! By rights I ought to be marching on Chalt to-morrow, instead of fooling round here with contractors and leaving my picked officers to do their work. God knows the delay has been

none of my making; yet if I can't carry out Government plans to the letter, the chances are they'll 'roll poly-syllables over me!' That's what knocks the heart out of a man; that, and the blind false economy which is the root of all evil. But we'll establish peace in these borders yet, God willing, with or without the help of a paternal Government!"

"Hear, hear! That's the spirit that makes things move," Desmond applauded quietly. Then a sudden smile flashed out. "Jove! What a lark it would be if we could translate into our shoes—just for a couple of months—a Secretariat swell from Simla and an armchair critic from Home; the sort that accuses us of 'K-C-B mania,' and talks airily of 'little Frontier Wars'!"

The farcical suggestion achieved its purpose. Lenox smiled thoughtfully; visualising delectable details.

"A most instructive lark!" said he. "Might open up a new era in Indian history! Laurence, my Sapper, would make quite a good skit out of the notion.—By the way, I want news of him. You can't give me any I suppose?"

"Rather! I've just spent a fortnight with him beyond Bunji. Pulled him through a go of fever and generally set him on his feet. Surely you got his account of the mud-flow disaster?"

"In Bunji nullah? I never got a line. The *dák's* gone to blazes. What was the damage, and where do you come in? Fire away, there's a good chap."

Thus admonished Desmond told the story of that fortnight in clipped, graphic phrases; a story of triumph wrested out of disaster, not all uncommon in the annals of Empire; and Lenox listened with the intent gaze and kindling eye of one who can read between the lines, because he himself has done likewise.

"Excellent—excellent, both of you!" was his final verdict. "Strikes me that Alan and his bridges may just solve the transport problem, and save the situation, which would please him mightily. Impounding that telegraph wire was a stroke of genius. It was sent up nine months ago—if you'll believe me! And just now I'd give the world for something more rapid and reliable than *dák*-runners. Half of 'em only exist on paper; and this year I believe the poor devils have not seen a penny

of pay, or even been relieved. However—Alan, the invaluable seems to have conjured good out of evil, which is our main mission up here, after all!"

It was near twelve when Desmond rose to go.

"You've cleared the air as usual, Theo," Lenox said at parting. "It was damned good luck getting you. I was half afraid when I applied that you mightn't care about serving under a junior."

"Proud to get the chance in your case, old man!" Desmond answered frankly. "And we'll pull this thing through between us, even if the odds are four to one, and our troops crippled with marching. Remember Harry the Fifth? 'The fewer men, the greater share of honour!'"

The three days following were too crowded with work and organisation to leave room for intimate talk. Lenox had decided to stiffen his slender army with a Volunteer Corps of Pathans, at work on the road, officered by the Civil Engineers in charge; and had despatched an urgent demand to Kashmir that all delayed baggage be pushed on with utmost speed to Astor, where Desmond would remain in charge till the last of the troops passed through.

And while an insignificant army was massing upon earth, the battalions of heaven, blue-black with snow, shrouded the heights, promising a winter exceptionally early and severe. On the last morning they woke to a white world; and at the hour of departure a belated *dák*-runner, half dead with cold, brought news at last of the Gurkha detachment, for whom the Burzil had done its worst. A blizzard on the summit; eighty men and coolies badly frost-bitten; one of the chief sufferers being the Officer in Command.

"And all for want of a few decent rest houses on the Pass," Lenox commented bitterly, as he handed Desmond the unwelcome screed. "Thank Heaven you're here to see after them, Theo. Hancock's name goes off the roll of combatants, I'm afraid; and he was mad keen to come up. Such is life! Good-bye, old man. Follow on the first minute you can."

And once again the leisurely cavalcade trailed its way northward; over Hatú Pir, where, in spite of Alan's

handiwork, mules and horses lay dead among the rocks, and gorged vultures, startled from their hideous feast, flapped heavily up to the nearest coign of vantage to watch the intruders pass. None the less did Lenox find good cause to applaud his Sapper's thoroughness throughout the march; and his greeting—when at last they struck the little camp, ten miles beyond the Indus—was one of those things a man does not readily forget. A few straight words quietly spoken; the magnetism of a mutual hand-clasp; an instant's commerce of the eyes: it is these that, in the main, make life worth living and work worth the doing. The majority may not acknowledge or even recognise the fact; but Laurence, being of the perceptive few, found in his Chief's blunt mead of praise a full and sufficient reward for the pains and penalties of a summer in the Indus Valley.

When Lenox departed, leaving Finlay behind on special transport duty, both officers returned to the Indus, where Alan's flying ferry was abundantly advertising its capacity to save the situation. Followed a fortnight of ceaseless activity and stress, that left a man small leisure for any consideration save the imperative need for food and sleep in the intervals of work. Life on the Gilgit Road was no bed of roses for the British Officer in these strenuous autumn weeks, when a thousand mules were kept working between Astor and Bunji, and the apathetic coolie must almost have reached his limit of endurance. Very speedily Laurence and Finlay became aware of Desmond's hand upon the reins. Traffic, if leisurely, was incessant. From morning to night the road was alive with a neutral-tinted crowd of bullocks and mules. The ferry landing-stages were piled with loads faster than Finlay could push them on, though he and Laurence worked like Titans, knowing well the urgency of need at the other end.

For Lenox's first letter from the Agency had contained a list of serious deficiencies ranging from military great-coats to tea and candles; to say nothing of the disquieting fact that not a fifth of the winter's grain supply had yet reached Gilgit.

"Heaven send we may all be living at the enemy's expense before Christmas!" Finlay remarked with a wry smile as he read. "If your royal friends, Tweedle Dum

and Tweedle Dee, were any real good at this game, they could be giving us a hot time of it just now."

But the cautious Chiefs confined their activities to their own domains, where they were very effectually occupied, as the sequel proved; and in the meantime four stout-hearted British Officers waged, undismayed, the prosaic Battle of the Road. At the fortnight's end Laurence and Finlay were relieved by a subaltern and a hundred Kashmiris from the North; and joyfully turning their backs upon the Indus, rode on up to Gilgit in three days.

And all this while, though Laurence spoke freely of Peshawur and of mutual friends there, no word of Lyndsay Videlle had passed his lips. It would seem that for him, the incident was closed; and Finlay, while respecting his silence, was pricked by a very human curiosity as to its cause, which Laurence himself could scarcely have analysed even if he would. He knew only that the shock of his recent disaster, the stimulant of Desmond's help and sympathy, and the big events in which he was called upon to play no mean part, had dispelled his miasma of settled misery; that reaction from his lonely labours to community of work and hope, constrained him to sink the tender fantasies of lover and poet in the clear-cut creed of the soldier—"Believe and go forward"; focussing all his energies on the task in hand, and ignoring a "beyond" that he might never be called upon to face. And there you have one of the virtues of war, over and above its keynote of stern self-discipline. It merges the unit in the mass; and in its sweep of vigorous concerted action the clamorous Ego—master-spirit of the age—is stifled, if only for a time.

By the middle of November, in defiance of obstacles innumerable, Lenox had the bulk of his composite army encamped between the Agency Bungalow and Gilgit Fort; Nomal and Chaichar Parri strongly garrisoned; and signallers at work on conspicuous heights along the route. Of laden coolies, filing up from the South, there seemed no end; and between rise and set of sun the valley was resonant with challenging bugle-calls, rattle of musketry and shouts of drilling men. Two thousand in all, efficient and otherwise; but, of these, one thousand only could be counted on for action. The rest must needs garrison the

Fort, and guard his long line of communication between Gilgit and Astor.

By this time the question "Is it Peace?" had been practically negatived. The twin States had sent their women and children into the mountains, and had strongly fortified their formidable position at Nilt. Hunza's epistolary style had blossomed into bombast and open defiance; and it remained only for Lenox to send in his formal ultimatum, so soon as the grain question would admit of his long-deferred advance on Chalt. Among the officers, the Gurkhas, and Pathans, spirits ran high at the prospect of hard fighting in store; and Mulk Aman's levies swaggered inordinately, on the strength of one day's musketry on the range! But Lenox alone had full cognisance of all the risks involved; the inadequacy of his commissariat even now; the prevailing opinion that his little army could not hope to make a stand against Hunza's thousands; and the immense strength of Nilt Fort, which must be stormed and taken out of hand; since an initial reverse would probably set the whole Frontier alight, from Chitral to Astor.

Desmond's arrival, with the last detachment, was a welcome event; and, before despatching the ultimatum, the two friends devoted an entire evening to such close talk as binds men to one another with hoops of steel; subjecting the whole situation to a stringent "tour of inspection," which revealed to the older man the infinite pains and thought bestowed by Lenox upon every item of the campaign. The plan of attack on Nilt Fort, with its clear grasp of detail, its mingled wisdom and boldness, that was the essence of the man, roused Desmond to enthusiasm.

"*L'audace, l'audace, et toujours l'audace!*" said he. "It's the only tune for savage warfare. You're a born General, Eldred. And you mark my word—whether it's three to one, or four to one, we'll carry the day. If the towers defy us, you can rely on Laurence to tackle the gate."

"Quite so. I am growing to have an immense faith in Alan," Lenox answered, rising and gathering up his papers, with a glow of satisfaction at his heart. "His friend Finlay's a valuable asset too; a cool, level-headed sort. And as for you, old man—!" His hand came down

heavily on Desmond's shoulder, and the smile that passed between them sufficed. "We've a stiffish job ahead of us," he added gravely. "But with such a first-rate lot of officers under me, I feel justified in daring a good deal, even—as you say—if it *is* three to one."

And on the day following, a mounted envoy, bearing the final word of the Indian Government, rode forth to speak with the enemy in the gate.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

If we are marked to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
—SHAKESPEARE.

IT was the last of November. The second of the three days granted by Lenox for consideration of his terms; and by now all available troops were concentrated in and around Chalt Fort ready to advance at a moment's notice. By now, too, the crops were reaped and garnered; the orchards, a black tangle of twigs shorn of their glory. Only the sky's unclouded azure, and the gleam of winter sunshine upon leagues of ice and snow, redeemed the monotony of rock and river-bed and vertical cliff. Only the little colony of tents, where dust-coloured figures hurried hither and yon, gave human significance to the scene. And down by the river at the foot of the plateau this microscopic activity was at its busiest. Here Laurence, with a few trained sappers, and a host of local coolies, had, in the space of two days, achieved a winter bridge across the shrunken torrent, connecting exposed islands of rocks by a succession of spans, tied securely together with telegraph wire.

Although it was early afternoon, the sun's rim neared the western snows, changing their diamond radiance to gold, and filling the gorges with ink-black shadow, while the men in the river-bed were urged to brisker movement by the first sharp breath of night. Laurence himself was among them; not as mere overseer and director, but working with his own hands more vigourously than them all; for, in view of imminent contingencies, the bridge must be completed before dark. That he would find the troops under marching orders on his return to camp, he had no manner of doubt; for a certain brown speck that

crept up the rough path to the plateau was no other than the envoy from Nilt, whose plight proclaimed the gist of the letters tucked away in his belt. Unhorsed, insulted, robbed and sadly crestfallen he made his way to the little office tent, where Lenox, Desmond and Finlay sat smoking and discussing the one topic of the moment. His lamentable tale was almost a foregone conclusion; though Lenox learnt with amusement that his old friend the Wazir—who had begged to be favourably remembered should trouble arise—was now the arch-opponent of peace and good-will. Finding the kings once more inclined to temporise, he had drawn his sword in council and threatened to behead any Rajah who, having taken up arms, should be fool enough to speak of giving in.

"Hear, hear! Sporting old gentleman!" Desmond applauded, tapping the arm of his chair. "Wish I might try conclusions with him—man to man."

"And that I might be there to see!" Lenox answered with a short laugh of relief. "Lord, it's a comfort to have things settled.—The Wazir commands at Nilt?" This to the messenger.

"At Nilt, *Hazúr*, with two thousand and five hundred men; five hundred more being across the river at Mayun. They have bullets and food enough, also, to last many months, and send word that they will fight until the Spring."

"It is possible that we may have something to say to that. Give me the letters."

The man complied and withdrew; and for a space there was silence in the little tent.

His Highness of Nagar wrote briefly and with dignity; but Hunza, rising to the occasion, piled bombast on defiance, and insult upon both. Lenox smiled and scowled alternately as he read; but at the culminating invitation his big laugh broke out.

"Listen to this, you chaps. Pretty good effrontery from a youngster of three and twenty. 'Come on, then, Colonel Lenox Sahib, if you dare to trespass into China and attack three nations with your paltry army. We are no longer allies of England; but have grasped the skirts of the manly Grey-coats, who will in due time, send their ammunition to sweep all insolent intruders from the face

of the land. Till then, we are able to withstand you for a year, if need be; even with bullets of gold and precious stones. And when we have trampled your troops underfoot like noxious insects, it will be seen how all Kashmir will rejoice at your defeat! As for yourself, Colonel Lenox Sahib—disturber of the peace of Empires—we will cut off your head and thereafter report you to the Indian Government. It is enough. I, Hunza Thum, have spoken.' Enough, indeed. God knows I've done my best to smooth 'em down. But that clinches matters once for all. We advance on Nilt to-morrow, in the lightest possible marching order."

Whereat Desmond whirled his pipe aloft and cheered, for all his three and forty years, and the wife and children who looked eagerly for his return. It has always been thus with soldiers of the first quality; and the world, even while it lifts hands of horrified protest, may be thankful that it is so.

The news sped through the camp like quicksilver. Laurence heard it, coming up at dusk, from his accomplished task; and by one of those paradoxes which make human nature the brave, bewildering, lovable thing it is, the knowledge that within the next two days he might be called upon to look death in the face, at close quarters, exhilarated him like a draught of morning air. Gurkhas, Sikhs, and Pathans heard it, and gave it greeting, with cheer upon lusty cheer. Only certain despicable spirits among the Kashmiris openly assured the uninitiated that the Colonel Sahib was taking them all to certain death; a fact which Lenox learnt later from the faithful Zyarulla, and which moved him to mingled anxiety and contempt. More than half his force consisted of Kashmir troops; and as a whole their loyalty and efficiency were undoubted. But a little leaven may leaven the whole lump; and there are few things more disturbing for a leader on the eve of a desperate venture than the least fraction of uncertainty as to the mettle of his men.

Be that as it might, the die was cast. By daylight, Finlay and fifty sepoys had crossed the river, under cover of the guns, and scrambled like hill goats up the trackless steeps of a ridge that towered eight hundred feet above the plain; a ridge that must be held and made practicable

for battery mules within twenty-four hours. Breast-works and plumes of smoke betokened a vigilant enemy—scouts merely, who fled upon their approach; and Finlay looking away across the valley, to three dark specks upon the emptiness of mountain and ravine—that he knew for forts armed to the teeth—marvelled, as Alan had marvelled in the spring, at the stupendous setting for this their "little fight." The power and quiet of the mountains, dreaming their age-long dream in the clear-eyed serenity of dawn, seemed silently to reprove the feverish and futile energies of man, "that hair-crowned bubble of the dust, the inheritor of few years and sorrows."

"Soldiering and philosophy don't belong!" Finlay reflected, with a half smile at his own incurable propensity for both; and at the moment soldiering stood easily first, for the very human reason that it proffered an opportunity of distinguishing himself in a fashion peculiarly acceptable to Gwen Rivers. Deeply as she loved her father, chance phrases had led him to believe that a fighter of distinction was the man for her allegiance; that a fine soldierly achievement might prove the aptest road to her heart. At least, it might give him courage to ask it of her; if—perilous if—she had not already bestowed it upon some younger, worthier man of his hands.

But here was neither time nor place for the weaving of visions, and turning his gaze from the sun-kissed snows, he scanned with interest the features of the morrow's route: the rough descent; the stretch of stony maidan, cleft by two deep nullahs, that might or might not mean serious delay; and, beyond again, the terraced fields culminating in the fort-crowned plateau of Nilt. Viewed from a height across eight miles of valley, the main citadel of Nagar appeared insignificant enough; but a careful study of Alan's notes and sketches had given Finlay a working knowledge of its strength. From the outer walls, vertical cliffs dropped sheer to the patch of cultivation below; and above this initial barrier showed the Fort itself—thick-set, bastioned; a compact mass of stone and mud and timber, seemingly proof against the worst that a couple of mountain guns could do. But the frontier fort, like Achilles, has its vulnerable point—

the tower. Here, in the upper part, timber predominates, and the shattering of a beam or two may bring down the whole. It was thus that Lenox hoped to achieve the storming of Niit; where, as yet, even binoculars revealed no sign of life.

Down at Chalt, on the other hand, all was movement, and ordered preparation. The road-making Pathans, under one of their engineers, crept slowly up the ridge, leaving behind them a zig-zag of path, by courtesy so called; while on the plateau every tent was being struck and stored in the Fort, together with all other items that could possibly be spared. The Spartan order, "one coolie-load for each officer," had cut down personal baggage to bare necessities; words that no two men interpret quite alike. Laurence at all events—though no longer writing to Peshawur—found volumes of Thompson's and of Vereker's poems quite as essential to salvation as a spare shirt; not to mention a packet of letters that lived in the breast pocket of his khaki coat. Yet, when at length the little force filtered down the cliffs of Chalt, and, filing across Alan's bridge, encamped on the enemy's ground, the coolies and mixed followers outnumbered the fighting men.

By nightfall Finlay had descended from his heights, and all was in readiness for the start at dawn. The massed square of men and animals—shrouded in the smoke of a hundred fires, under a canopy jewelled thick with flashing stars—was alive and alert from end to end. Clank of arms and braying of mules; the cheerful talk and laughter of soldiers unfeignedly glad to put their manhood to the proof; and in the midst of it all, seventeen British officers enjoying an *al fresco* mess dinner, after the simple-hearted, schoolboy fashion of their kind. And if Desmond and Lenox—the only husbands among them—were troubled by an undercurrent of grave and even anxious thought, they took care that no ripple of it should disturb the surface serenity essential to leaders on the eve of action.

Laurence enjoyed ten minutes' talk with Lenox before turning into the sleeping-bag that served for bed, bedding, and tent in one; talk that mainly concerned his actual and possible share in the assault; and thereafter sank

to sleep with the Colonel's last words echoing in his brain: "Well, good-night Alan. If the pop-guns don't break up the hornets' nest, you'll get your chance to-morrow."

Would he get it? he wondered drowsily; and if so, what would it mean for him—that elusive and coveted event, which may come to a man but once in a life—his chance?

## CHAPTER XXV.

Stripped and adust in the stubble of Empire
Scything and binding the full sheaves of sovranty,
Thus, O thus gloriously
Shall you fulfil yourselves,
Thus, O thus mightily
Shew yourselves sons of mine,
Yea, and win grace of me—
I am the Sword.

—W. E. Henley.

Authoritative bugle notes, piercing the frosty dark, proclaimed in cheerfully familiar tones that the day marked for conquest or calamity was at hand; and roused the whole camp to a man. No confusion; no aimless hurrying to and fro; little enough of speech, except from the vociferous coolie, who can accomplish nothing without incessant appeals to Allah, or abuse of his nearest neighbour. The contents of the Order Book had been made known, over night, to all; and within an hour the *zareba* lay empty under fast paling stars, while a slow-moving ink stain upon the lesser dark showed where the Hunza-Nagar Field Force neared the ridge; their first "big bunker"—in the phrase of golf-bitten subalterns—on the eight-mile course to Nilt. Daybreak found the little column narrowed to single file, scrambling and climbing rather than marching up the last, steepest stretch of hillside, which, in spite of yesterday's labour, remained as difficult and even dangerous an undertaking as the most venturesome heart could wish; though the excitement of dodging showers of rock and stone tended to become monotonous and even annoying—for the unsuccessful. But beyond a few hard knocks no serious catastrophe happened; and in the fulness of time, the advance guard, led by Laurence and his sappers, crowned the ridge with a burst of cheers; Lenox, and the main body of troops following hard upon. By now the chill twilight of dawn had given place to a radiant morning of frost: from

snow-line to shimmering snow-line, one sweep of frailest azure, into which even the cloud islands of sunrise had melted, as foam-flakes melt into the sapphire of untroubled seas.

"By Jove! A ripping day for a fight! Come on, you fellows, and take a look at Nilt. Your first and last chance before the game begins in earnest." The speaker was Jack Travers of the cheerful soul; and at once half a dozen binoculars were levelled at the day's objective, where gay little flags fluttered, and scurrying black dots, without the walls, showed that the watchers on the ridge had carried word of their coming.

"Pretty tough nut to crack."

"How the deuce do we get within range?"

"Miles away from water, by the looks of it. Poor sport for us if the assault fails."

"Fails? My word, Harkness, if the Colonel heard you—!"

This from Laurence; and the Colonel, standing ten yards away, heard all, not without a smile of satisfaction at the last remark.

Descent, as in most cases, proved even more trying and dangerous than the climb; but accidents were few, and at the foot Lenox called a halt for the relief of horses and men. Then on again, along the stony-hearted valley; silent, save for the tramping of feet, and the rush of the unseen river through its enclosing walls. Noise enough, however, when they reached the two nullahs marked by Finlay the day before: sheer gashes three hundred feet deep, the primitive tracks, leading in and out of them, almost annihilated by an enemy well versed in the rules of the game. Hours of delay, here, while sappers and Pathans worked manfully, and the echoes of blasting were answered from Nilt plateau by shouts and defiant throbbing of drums.

Thus it was early afternoon when the advance guard, rounding a spur that for miles had blocked their view, came abruptly upon the towers and walls of Nilt Fort. Set upon higher ground, the sturdy building—lifeless, soundless, yet full of eyes—towered above them, not two hundred and fifty yards away. To Alan every line was familiar, but the Gurkhas exclaimed at sight

of it, and joked among themselves, with all the relish of born hill warriors over the stubborn fight ahead. Seven hours' hard marching and empty water bottles were of no account. They asked nothing but leave to begin at once. Nor was it long before all ranks had disposed themselves in accordance with their leader's bold plan of attack. Every officer, British and native, had received his orders; every man from Major Desmond, D. A. A. G., to the last-joined and least combative Kashmir recruit, knew that retreat was ruled out of the programme; that by sundown those impervious-looking walls must, at any price, be reduced to ruins. The mere position required it, if nothing else. "Miles away from water," as young Harkness of the Gurkhas had guessed: the river-bed untenable; and a watercourse that linked the fort to the valley, had been stacked with felled fruit-trees, that would otherwise have afforded cover to the besiegers. Stark cliffs, stark walls, stark heights, above and around, confronted these audacious invaders of Hunza the unconquerable, who, upon this fateful day was to experience a fashion of fighting undreamed of by him or his kind.

On the first coign of vantage beyond the spur, Lenox established Dick and his guns, with an escort of Punjabis under Finlay. Sappers and Gurkhas, stationed close at hand, waited on events; while up the rough sides of the spur Mulk Aman's levies scrambled like cats, to crown the heights and rain hell-fire into the labyrinthine alleys within the walls. A third party led by Desmond and Travers went farther yet; and crossing the hill dropped down into trenches behind the fort, with the daring intent of firing into the loopholes at close range, directly the guns announced the opening of the game. That the plan was Desmond's own need hardly be set down.

Meanwhile, near the cliff's edge, Richardson brought his guns into the best position circumstances would permit.

"Tough job," he muttered, scanning the sparsely loop-holed walls. "Something like tackling a rhino with pocket pistols."

"Quite so!" Lenox answered, smiling. "All depends on hitting the weak spot. But we sleep in there to-night, —those that are left. Now then, Dick; stir 'em up. Concentrate on the tower and aim high."

For answer the two seven-pounders spoke in concert: two shells—birds of ill-omen—skimmed through the blue, and dropped into the heart of the Fort. The thunderclap of their explosion wakened the dead walls to life. Roll of drums and yells of defiance greeted the intruders; and every loophole spat fire. From the heights, and from Desmond's venturesome little party, came an answering crackle of musketry; from Lenox a sharp order, "Gurkhas to the front." On the first word section after section of the little dust-coloured men—dwarfed to pigmies by the gigantic scale of things—darted from cover to cover, and made such brisk play with their rifles as opportunity allowed. But the Kanjuts were cautious as they were cunning. Rarely did the roll of a Dard head-dress appear above the parapets, and arrow-slits were few and far between. It soon became clear to Lenox that beyond making "a hell of a racket" they were making little else; also it seemed that by an ill-chance the corner tower had been built solid to the top.

"Shift the guns forward," he commanded at length. "We must try another one, and drop a few shells inside."

"Forward?" Richardson raised his eyebrows. He knew his own duty and his friend's temper too well to do more; but Lenox echoed his unspoken thought.

"No cover, and deuced short range? I'm quite aware of that, man. But if we're to fight by the card, we can have all the baggage up from Chalt and settle down here for six months! Get in closer, Dick; and let 'em have it for all you're worth. Ten minutes more of this, and Laurence blows up the gates."

"Right. I'll do my best. It'll be a warm corner."

A fatally warm corner; as the next ten minutes proved. Two gunners mortally wounded; three sepoys hit; and once, as Richardson turned to give an order a bullet whizzed through his helmet grazing the scalp.

"Hurt, are you?" Lenox asked quickly, seeing that he winced and swore under his breath.

"Not a bit of it."

"Good luck." But some minutes later a thin red streak trickled down behind his ear; and Lenox, noting it, smiled as one who understood.

"Nothing to count, eh?" said he. "All the same we've

had enough gunnery practice on adamant. What with stone-protected roofs and their infernally narrow slits, I doubt if we've accounted for a dozen."

A fresh outburst from the Fort seemed to ratify his statement. The Gurkhas answered with a will; and a hot five minutes ensued; the Kanjuts concentrating their fire upon the officers. A bullet whinged past Lenox' shoulder cutting the cloth. Another carried away the tip of Harkness' ear. Two sepoys fell; and even as the shots began to grow more desultory, Finlay staggered backward, stifling a groan. One arm dropped limply; and in a flash Alan's was behind his shoulder.

"Bad—is it, Julian?"

"'Fraid so. Upper arm smashed, I fancy.'

"The right one, too. Hard lines."

"Better than the right leg, anyway!" And the smile that went with the words was a brave thing to see. "Wylie shall splice me up and send me back."

"Hope he will. Let me get you away from this."

But as they moved off the Colonel's voice rang out. "Come on, Laurence. Your turn."

Finlay straightened himself sharply. "Good luck to your venture, Larry. Here comes Wylie. See you later —inside the walls!"

And he went on alone, his eyes dimmed by more than physical pain. So much for his hopes of distinction! The stars in their courses rarely fought for Julian Finlay.

Meantime Laurence was back at his post, keen as a schoolboy for his own share of the fun.

"My innings, sir?" he asked eagerly. Lenox nodded.

"Guns are no good. You have your orders. The place to be taken by storm—at any cost. You and the Gurkhas'll manage it right enough."

"By God, we will!"

An order shouted; a deafening chorus from all arms, under cover of which the little storming party hurled themselves upon the abattis, that cut them off from the outer gate:—Laurence and his orderly, two Gurkha subalterns, and a hundred men. These last, whipping out their *kukris*, hacked a narrow opening in the tangle of trunks and branches, while the garrison rained lead into them as effectively as circumstances would allow.

Lenox, watching intently with narrowed lids, saw the three subalterns force their way through; the Sapper's tall figure well ahead, his Pathan orderly and half a dozen Gurkhas close upon their heels. Leaving the rest to hack and scramble after them as best they might, the intrepid little vanguard dashed forward, rounded a wall that flanked the main gate, and were lost to view.

"Thank God it's Alan," was the Colonel's thought. "He'll go through Hell sooner than fail." Which was true. Laurence had got his chance, and he meant to make it good.

On rounding the wall they escaped the harassing hail-storm from the Fort, only to encounter a no less harassing swarm of hornets from the *sungahs* across the ravine; and in the teeth of it six little Gurkhas attacked the wooden door like devils incarnate. A crash; a yell of triumph; and they were through the outer wall, free for a moment to draw breath unmolested, till the towers, flanking the gate, and the garrison within, realized their presence. The Gurkhas grinned and sheathed their knives.

"*Shah-bash*,* men!" Laurence cried heartily. "My *tamasha* now! Fire into the fort you fellows. We shall be discovered in a minute and peppered without mercy."

On the word a familiar crackle from both towers was followed by pattering bullets concentrated on the gate; a sharp onslaught from loopholes in the main wall and even in the great door itself. Here Laurence and the Pathan, crouching low, coolly laid their slabs of gun-cotton, and weighted them with stones, while scores of bullets whinged about their ears. By rights they should have been hit a dozen times:—but they were not. Umra Khan had his wrist broken; and as Laurence struck a match to ignite the fuse, a burning pain in his thigh turned him sick for half a moment. The match scorched his fingers and he dropped it with an oath; lit a second, applied it, and rising hastily, both men moved back under shelter of the wall to await the result.

One second: two seconds: five seconds. No explosion; —only the bullets, thick as hail.

Laurence swore between his teeth.

*Well done.

"God! Something wrong with the fuse. Pitch into 'em like the devil, Harkness. I must go back."

It was to be a case of faring through Hell after all; a case of failure, or certain death. Not that he saw it so. In that supreme instant he saw only the thing to be done, and the imperative need for doing it. One only thought dominated him as he dashed into that zone of fire;—the fuse, on which all depended, must somehow be ignited—before the inevitable end.

The three minutes that followed seemed as many hours to the subalterns plying their revolvers for dear life, and to the big man, crouching at the gateway, half dazed by the clamour of rifles, and the humming of lead pellets round his head,—vainly trying to strike a match; of all perverse inanimates the most maddening.

The head of the first fizzled and flew off; and as the second flared up gaily, a stone crashed down upon his collar-bone, disabling his left arm. Single-handed, he tried again; once—twice—the thing was done! And the inevitable end was not yet.

With a shout of triumph he staggered back to the wall. A shot grazed his neck, baring the flesh, another glanced harmlessly off his belt; and the cheers of his comrades were lost in a shattering explosion that darkened the air with smoke and dust, with splintered fragments and volcanic showers of stones. Dizzy from loss of blood and the intoxication of success, Laurence reeled against his orderly, and gripped the man, for half a minute. Then righting himself, and shouting, "Come on, you fellows!" with all the force of his lungs, he plunged into the breach; the first man to set foot in Nilt Fort.

And high up, on the spur, whence Mulk Aman and his levies had been following the whole desperate affair, in a tense silence, the old Rajah shouted also: "*Inshallah!* They are within! It is fighting of giants, not of men!"

True, the hornets' nest was demolished past question. But the hornets still remained to be reckoned with; and the devoted little band of men, who had carried the day, found themselves at once fighting furiously, hand to hand, in the dark of a fifteen-foot tunnel that pierced the wall behind the door. Not till then did they discover that there were but nine of them to hold their hard-won

position against overwhelming odds. The rest must have missed the opening; possibly did not know it had been effected. Harkness' bugler had vanished in the thick of the fray; and there was nothing for it but to scramble back over the ruins—running the gauntlet of a scorching fire from friend and foe—till he found the men, without whom there could be no hope of victory.

The three officers were close together when he announced his decision, waved aside Barnard's offer to go in his place, and embarked on his perilous venture with the Sapper's cheery assurance in his ears: "Don't fret, Bo-peep! They can't be far off. We'll hang on by our teeth, somehow, till you get back." The which they proceeded to do in a fashion worthy of both races—brown and white; Laurence, in defiance of two wounds and a broken collar-bone, holding his own with the superhuman strength that is given to men at supreme crises; a strength not of the body, but of the soul.

Through the twilit tunnel surged a seething mass of men, drunk with the lust of slaughter; and, but for its narrow length, no amount of pluck could have saved that handful of heroes from annihilation. Within ten minutes two Gurkhas were killed; and Laurence dashing forward to avenge them, was checked by a shot full in the chest, which must have ended the day's work for him, but that the bullet struck the buckle of his shoulder strap; and, glancing off, entered his arm near the shoulder. Upon this fourth hurt he had almost fallen, had not Umra Khan been at hand to uphold him through the bad moment of the body's self-assertion.

Twenty minutes:—and still no reinforcements. By now all six were in a like case; Barnard badly hit; and a pitiless enemy pressing them hard. Once again Laurence foresaw the inevitable end; and once again its coming was deferred. Instead, through the clamour of the fight, came unmistakable shouts of Gurkhas; near and nearer; till they swept through the breach with a culminating yell—and Laurence knew they had carried the day; knew his chance had come and gone, bringing him the best that heart of soldier could wish.

The Kanjuts, believing that the whole force had relieved those half dozen devils whom lead could not kill—be-

lieving also in the "live-to-fight-another-day" ethics of warfare—broke back and fled in dire confusion; a thousand men and more routed, past hope of rallying, by three British subalterns and a hundred little tigers from Nepal.

And now from every gate and opening on the far side of the Fort discomfited tribesmen poured forth like water, leaping and scrambling down impassable cliffs to the river-bed, and up again to the breastworks that held the plateau beyond; Desmond's little party, stiffened by the main body of Kashmiris, doing good execution among them as they went. But for Desmond himself the game was over. Propped up under the lea of a rock, his face grey with mortal pain, his eyes alert and alive as ever, he could only watch and exult, and shout encouragement to all who came within hail. A sepoy had been despatched to report him wounded, and he was in no way anxious for the Doctor's advent.

It was Lenox who arrived first, and exclaimed in dismay at sight of him. But Desmond smiled and held out a hand.

"Congratulate you, Eldred!" he said heartily. "Lord, man, don't mind me. Can't we push on across the ravine and carry their *sungahs* before dark?"

"Wish to God we could. But the cunning devils have checked us—for the moment. Swept away all trace of a track down the cliffs; turned their watercourses over the easier slopes, casing 'em in solid ice. It's a miracle how they've got across themselves. All done beforehand of course; and I'm puzzled to know why. Hunza's letter must have been a stack of lies."

"More than probable. Wish we could get at the facts."

And when, in the fulness of time, these came to light, it transpired that the desertion and destruction of Nilt in favour of the stronger position beyond had been seriously considered, and only overruled by the Wazir of Nagar, who believed the Fort to be impregnable; as in truth it was by ordinary methods of warfare. In desperate ventures of this kind audacity and personal heroism are the sole passports to success.

A spasm of pain across Desmond's face brought Lenox down upon one knee.

"I'm afraid they've hurt you badly, Theo."

"Pretty well! Lodged a bullet in my body. But I am here still—and I mean to stop! There go the good old guns again!"

"I've set Dick to play upon the fugitives and shell out the little *sungah* across the way. It's all we can do to-night. Worse luck. To-morrow the Pathans and sappers shall get to work."

"How about *the* Sapper—the hero of the day? Seen him yet?"

"No. But Harkness brought me a great account of it all. Alan's knocking about in the Fort keeping the men in order. Badly wounded, of course. I'll look him up when I can. There seems no finding anyone in that rabbit warren!"

But in due time, he ran across the hero of the day; limping cheerfully along one of the narrow lanes, with Umra Khan for walking stick; his helmet tilted backward, his uniform clotted and stained with blood; his left arm roughly bandaged and slung up in the Pathan's turban; the blue light of battle still in his eyes. A battered and unlovely hero; but the heart of Eldred Lenox glowed at sight of him, and Umra Khan was manifestly proud to be used as a walking stick by the "*bahadur Sahib*." So the Gurkhas had christened him; and the name speedily became current coin among the troops.

"Hullo, Colonel! Glad to see you," he called out as Lenox came up.

"Same here, old chap! But man, how they've knocked you about."

"You said—'at all costs,' sir!"

Lenox nodded with a grim compression of the lips. "They've been heavy enough, God knows. Reported yourself to Wylie yet?"

"Not I; so long as I can crawl! I tell you, it's been pandemonium in here. The Gurkhas and Pathans fairly went Berserk. But we managed to hold 'em in; and now they're ferretting round for flags and more prisoners. I can hardly keep sober myself! Great, isn't it, Colonel?"

"Great indeed! If only we could have finished the day's work." And he repeated his news of the serious check that had taken half the flavour out of success.

Laurence listened with a clouded brow. But at mention of the morning's programme it cleared.

"Don't you worry, Colonel. We'll fix up a track of sorts in spite of 'em, Walton and I. They're capital chaps, these civilians. Everyone's nerves must be bullet-proof after to-day; and at least I can play overseer once I'm patched up."

"You?" Lenox echoed with a queer smile. "I'm afraid your share in this outing's over. It was grandly done, Alan. You're safe for a V. C., and you must be content to rest on your laurels."

"Laurels be damned!" He glowed none the less. "Why, we've only just begun!"

The words were truer than he imagined. Yet Lenox spoke truth also. For him, the campaign was at an end.

The three days following brought home to the two leaders—as in effect they were—the disheartening truth that their temporary check was like to prove more serious and prolonged than either had believed; that it might be a matter of weeks before their insignificant force succeeded in turning a position of such immense natural strength as could hardly be paralleled, even in the Hindu Kush. Small wonder Hunza was reckoned invincible, seeing that all the gods of the wildest mountain region on earth took sides with him against the world. From the great crevassed glaciers of Rakapushi, on one hand, to those beyond Mayun Fort on the other, a barrier of precipices and unmeasured heights, where nothing grew save ominous lines of *sungahs*, packed with marksmen. No cover to speak of. The whole position admirably suited to that most deadly form of hill warfare—the rock avalanche. And immediately ahead precipitous cliffs—outlined with breast-works proof against shot and shell,—barred his advance on Thol Fort.

To crown all, report estimated the enemy's numbers at four thousand—no less. A discouraging collocation of facts.

Determined attempts to repair the broken track, in the teeth of a raking fire from the *sungahs* across the way, had been reluctantly abandoned as too costly. A Gunner subaltern and ten sepoys swelled the list of casualties;

and in their present straits, cut off from all possibility of help till June, they could better afford to lose time than men. Hard days, these, for Lenox, with the knowledge at his heart that even temporary failure might inflame the Indus valley and Chitral; harder still perhaps, for his wounded fellows, condemned to lie stricken and in pain, listening to the racket without, keenly aware that their chief had need of them, yet powerless to lift a helping hand; days, none the less, which verified in full, the dictum of a brilliant fighter, that conscientiously and boldly followed, few professions call forth the higher qualities of human nature more strongly than that of a soldier in times of war and tumult.

And at the end of them Lenox saw himself condemned, as in the spring, to a waiting game, in the hope that exhaustive reconnoitring might reveal some point weak enough for direct assault; some means of outflanking the tribesmen with a minimum of loss. But although actual fighting was at a standstill, work in plenty remained to be done; defences to be strengthened; and a gun-bastion, fronting the enemy, added to the Fort. Finally it was decided that all tents and baggage be brought up from Chalt, and the wounded in charge of Wylie sent back to quiet and comfort at the Gilgit Agency.

Never were five men more ungrateful for obvious mercies! Laurence and Desmond openly rebelled. But the world holds one undisputed autocrat;—and Wylie was adamant. Desmond's condition alone made the move imperative, if only to Chalt. His wound had proved a dangerous one, and the extraction of the bullet a case of kill or cure. True, he had survived the ordeal; but Wylie was far from satisfied; and in the pain of that knowledge Lenox had come near to unwishing a brilliant feat of arms.

He sat late with his friend on the eve of departure, talking fitfully, avoiding anxious topics; and not until their last moment did Desmond broach the matter nearest his heart.

"Eldred—I've been thinking. You must write some sort of an account of me—to Honor. I'd scribble a few lines; but that fiend Wylie won't let me stir. Not a word of his croaking, mind you. It's all moonshine. I'm

made of iron; and I'll never believe I'm in danger of dismissal till I hear my own parting salute!"

Lenox had a smile for the extravagant speech, that was yet intrinsically true.

"I'll tell her that some day!" he said, catching a ray of hope from the other's unconquerable spirit. "Danger or no, Wylie's the man to pull you through."

And in the first glimmer of morning the five litters, with their escort, set out to retrace the rough eight miles to Chalt. Here, on Desmond's account, they must needs wait a week before moving into Gilgit, where Captain Hancock of the Gurkhas still lay alone in hospital, cursing his luck. A disheartening journey—physical miseries apart—for soldiers, in the height of health and spirits, pushed off the board in the opening moves of the game. But the service of his country teaches a man two things at least, if nothing else:—to achieve the impossible without undue conceit of himself; and to accept vicissitudes of every kind with a stoical serenity, even if cursing and bitterness abide within.

So these:—Desmond, keenly aware, beneath his stout-hearted denials, that his life hung in the balance; Finlay with his right arm gone; the young Gunner subaltern, not yet five and twenty, in mortal fear of losing a leg; Laurence and Barnard, alone—though desperately hurt—upheld by the certainty of recognition to come. Perhaps, of the five, Finlay's case was hardest: maimed for life without chance of striking a blow; and in the same breath cheated of the far, faint hope that had newly begun to glimmer on his horizon. If he had overrated his disabilities aforetime, Fate had punished him now by disabling him in earnest. Small wonder that, for a time, he saw life as through smoked glass. And in truth, to all at Gilgit—whatever their private ills—the next few weeks gave ample scope for the exercise of patience and cheerfulness upon very slender grounds; save only on the glad day when Desmond's iron frame and will to live triumphantly dispelled Wylie's "moonshine," and an express carried the news to Lenox at Nilt.

For the rest, reports from the front were calculated to undermine even Theo's incurable optimism. Mayun Fort was clearly impregnable. Persistent and intrepid

reconnoitring did little more than emphasize the impossibility of turning the position. Feints, reconnaissances, night attacks, were skilfully planned, and no less skilfully frustrated by a vigilant enemy. Yet, in defiance of repeated failure, the little force held its own; hoping against hope for the discovery of some sort of track up the opposing cliffs that would admit of a direct assault.

And at last, on Christmas Eve, while six damaged officers and their jailer lounged in the Agency drawing-room, over tea and cigars, little Jack Travers broke in upon them with the triumphant news that once more two subalterns and a handful of men had carried all before them; that Lenox and his redoubtable little army were even now marching upon Nagar in force. To a running accompaniment of questions the tale was told of the little Dogra Sepoy who, after patient exploring in the dark of night, succeeded in working his way up twelve hundred feet of cliff crowned by Hunza's breastworks; of the decision that Jack Travers, with a brother subaltern and a hundred men should attempt the same precarious feat at dawn, under cover of a murderous fire from Nilt; and, at imminent risk of annihilation, storm the *sungahs* above; an achievement that for skill, doggedness, and cool-headed daring stands unsurpassed in the annals of Frontier warfare.

Coming suddenly, after weeks of pain and suspense, the strong revulsion of feeling fairly swept them off their feet; the older men no less than the boys; and that night, at Mess, on a spontaneous impulse, Desmond proposed the health of Colonel Lenox and the British Subaltern—"with musical honours."

"For by Jove, it's been a sub's campaign first and last; and I'll go bail the Colonel's proud to acknowledge the fact!"

A subaltern's campaign, indeed; and in face of the statement it is worth considering how again and yet again, in "our rough island story," the tide of affairs has been turned by this same unfailing readiness of the young British officer to take the world upon his shoulders; to confront all, and dare all, even upon the slenderest prospect of success.

END OF BOOK II.

# BOOK III.

## THE ABYSMAL STRIFE.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

> The tune in us is lost;
> And whistling up back alleys to the moon
> Will never find it.
>
> —E. B. Browning.

The long-drawn whine of the punkah rope was getting on Lyndsay's nerves. The sleep of which she had been cheated for many nights brooded, like a dense fog, over her brain, blurring the clear-cut edge of thought. Soul and body craved respite from the unvarying round of ice-pack, thermometer-chart, and chicken broth. Happily the worst was over. Deep, regular breathings from the bed assured her that Monty had fallen into the first natural sleep for many days; and in the release from tension her every nerve cried out for rest.

For Lyndsay also had won through her campaign; the woman's campaign of the sickroom,—unromantic, monotonous, yet far from inglorious; even if the life fought for be the life of a Gummy Vansittart, whose exit from this planet would have troubled no living soul save one. The last person assuredly for whom Lyndsay would have chosen to render such signal services as had been thrust upon her by weeks of nursing. But the ironies of life are many and bewildering. It is ours to serve not whom we would, but whom we may; and although Lyndsay's recoil from Carrie's unlovely son came perilously near to hate, she could not stand aside and see him done to death by a distracted mother. For the trouble was typhoid; and Videlle, harassed by an outcrop of illness in the city, had small leisure for the supervision without which his stringent instructions were wasted breath. As for a trained nurse, Carrie had approached hysterics upon the suggestion. She would have no strange woman tampering with her child—not she! Shutting her out of the room and murdering him under her very eyes!

"Presumably she prefers to do the murdering on her own account!" had been Videlle's caustic comment

on the scene. But when the case threatened to prove serious he had simply announced his intention of wiring for a nurse. Carrie had stormed and sobbed alternately—without avail; and it was at this point that Lyndsay had proffered her services for night work in place of the dreaded hireling.

Videlle's relief was manifest; though he guessed shrewdly what it must have cost his wife to make an offer entailing partial neglect of her own little daughter, who, in eight months, had clearly become the mainspring of her hope and love. This unwelcome fact had conspired with her chance revelation on that August evening to pervert their God-given link into a stone of stumbling;—the more fatal in their case because, jealousy apart, the man's racial instinct rebelled against the woman's refusal, or inability, to share his point of view.

There were moments when he was tempted to blame her, both for this first failure and for her unspoken hope that no further experience of motherhood might be hers. Yet precisely in these moments was his righteous disapproval damped by the intolerable thought that in her view the initial fault was his; that she saw him, with those clear eyes of hers, tainted, physically, by the curse of mixed blood; spiritually, by the curse of moral cowardice and deliberate deceit. This last troubled his conscience mainly because it had failed of its effect; and because it had evidently troubled hers. It was the reiterate sense of inferiority to her, from whom his mere husbandhood demanded the lifted gaze of uncritical adoration, that galled his vanity at every turn. Not that his better self unwished a fraction of the fastidiousness that set them as the poles asunder. She held him by those very differences; by her unclouded outlook on aspects of life that eluded him; and, in the beginning, he had honestly desired to worship and amend. But it is one thing for a man to acknowledge himself unworthy in the privacy of his soul; and distinctly another to suspect that the paramount woman may endorse his skin-deep opinion. This suspicion it was wherefrom James Videlle had forged the two-edged sword, dreaded by Lyndsay, when she had pleaded with him, and known her pleading vain.

Since that moment, the awkward knowledge shared had been studiously avoided; but more than once Videlle thought he discerned reminder of it in some unwitting glance or change of tone; and always he believed that beneath her tenderness lurked a delicate scorn more humiliating than open reproach. A saner man, knowing the woman, had trampled upon the ignoble thought; or at least striven to live it down. But Videlle was not thus made. He encouraged it rather, till the poison of it so perverted him that he read blame and even contempt into her lightest criticism of his speech or act. Indifferent to her opinion he could never become; instead he grew morbidly sensitive and irritable; quick to take offence at a question or even a smile; and Lyndsay, for all her woman's gift of endurance, was fast losing the hope of a better understanding that had set a passing rainbow among the clouds.

Thus those eight months that should have merged them into closer communion, had seen them, rather, drifting into tacit admission of failure: the man engrossing himself more and more in his work, responding more readily to the lure of card-table and whisky bottle; the woman concentrating heart and hope on the child, and looking for refreshment to her friendship with Monica Rivers, or to the books that alone had power to lift her out of life's daily dust and set her feet in a large room.

Carrie's return in September had reduced their occasional hours alone to a minimum; and she, perceiving that Lyndsay's light was dimmed, in a measure, had rejoiced over Jim's conversion to common-sense. Nor did she fail to make capital out of the fact. Cautiously, and with more tact than aforetime, she had let fall a word of sympathy here, of veiled disparagement there; interlarding these with skilful allusions to "the devoted Sapper" which manifestly hit the mark. But the advent of great elemental evils—sickness, anxiety, and the Shadow of Death—had wrought changes no less great, if no less transient than themselves; though Lyndsay had found Carrie's abject dependence and gratitude little more acceptable than the pinpricks of spite: and to-night she looked forward, with unfeigned relief, to the day when Monty would be fit for the journey to Mussoorie, where he and

Carrie would spend part of the summer with friends of their own *jāt*.

The passing readjustment between husband and wife was quite another matter, and equally welcome to both. For as there is a blind spot in every eye, so is there a beauty spot in almost every character; and in the sick-room Videlle showed at his best—assured, alert, eminently controlled. Seen thus, it was hard to believe him the man whose violences and vacillations so fatally alienated respect; while Lyndsay's substratum of practical ability, her patience and firmness with Carrie's intractable son had revived the man's deep-rooted admiration, dimmed of late by her acquiescence in failure and her supposed scorn of himself. No link on earth like community of work and hope; its effect strengthened, in this case, by passing elimination of the main causes of friction —the superfluous Sapper and little Monica, whom Mrs. Rivers had taken under her wing. Videlle had not failed to note, with satisfaction, the cessation of letters from Gilgit. His vigilant scrutiny of Lyndsay's *dâk* had relaxed; and but for Carrie the matter had almost faded from his mind. She it was who had been swift to detect the re-appearance of a certain large square envelope, with which she had good reason to be familiar; more than one of its predecessors having been delayed in transit, while she satisfied her curiosity by the simple process of unsealing them over steam. The result had proved disappointing. True, Laurence dispensed with conventional preamble, and signed himself "Yours always"; words open to portentous construction! For the rest, cryptic allusions to Frontier problems, and still more cryptic comments on Thompson's poetry, interspersed with quotations that set her brain whirling, struck her as "mightee poor stuff" to receive from a "devoted admirer." It was not thus, she thanked her stars, that a certain Hibernian Traffic Superintendent phrased his susceptibility to her charms.

But this first greeting after long silence—it had arrived opportunely during Lyndsay's prescribed hours of rest—must surely contain matter more personal, more incriminating. Disappointment again! Laurence, recovering slowly from his wounds, had found time to "think o'

things"; and had arrived at the sane conclusion that if his friendship counted for anything with Lyndsay, not motherhood itself need affect the sole relation possible between them. In his own regenerate opinion, he had behaved like a morbid fool; and had quite possibly puzzled and disappointed her by a silence she could not be expected to understand. Hence his first letter, embarked upon with little of explanation or apology, beyond the mention of blocked passes and the strenuous prelude to the campaign; which, apart from its record of heroism and daring, had proved an unqualified political success. Carrie found it all prodigiously dull reading. What on earth did it matter to Lyndsay that "Our friend Tweedledee has made a clean bolt of it into Yarkhand, to the open jubilation of his devoted subjects, who are quite grateful to us for having licked them! And Russia fairly admits that we have slammed the door in her face. You can imagine if the Colonel is pleased!"

Bah! Carrie decided that a man who could write such twaddle to a beautiful woman must be a very poor kind of fool, or far too cautious to be any sort of use. Clearly if this weapon were to serve her turn plausible innuendoes and her own imagination must suffice.

Two envelopes had followed this one; but Carrie, fathoms deep in despair, and gratitude to Lyndsay, had let them pass unheeded; and it was the last of them that Lyndsay drew out of her pocket on this night of April while she kept watch over the sleeping boy. The return of her friend, whose long silence had disappointed her keenly, had come at a time when her spirit seemed sunk in a settled apathy; a day-to-day endurance of the inevitable that could only be called living because she was not conspicuously dead; and three letters from Gilgit—breezy, spontaneous letters, full of the stir and stimulant of healthy action, had refreshed her like draughts of mountain air. The evening post had brought her two quarto sheets closely written; but she had not found time to do more than glance at the first page; and now as she read on, her tired face glowed, her lips parted in a low sound of content. Carrie, seeing her at that moment, would have suspected the desired indiscretion at last! Yet the

paragraph that so elated her held a mere passing allusion to herself.

"By the way," Laurence wrote, "the honours for our little fight are in the Gazette at last; and I'm sure it will gladden your kind heart to know that three of us subs have earned the V. C., my unworthy self among the number! I get my Captaincy also—a great boon; and consider I'm finely rewarded for a few hours of fighting and a few weeks of pretty acute discomfort on the top of it. The Colonel gets a C. B. and his rank made *pukka*. So we are all mightily pleased with ourselves, as you may guess. Last night at dinner you should have heard the row we made! Speechifying; healths with musical honours; and everyone confiding to everyone else that he was a jolly good fellow, at the utmost pitch of his lungs. Sounds a bit foolish on paper—doesn't it? But man is born to foolishness as the sparks fly upward. It's the firstest touch of nature that makes us all kin; and I I know *you'll* understand. Major Desmond was in great form. A splendid fellow. Hope you meet him one of these days. The only big fly in the ointment is another sharp attack of "Russian scare." Looks uncommonly like the real thing this time. No doubt about troops massing on the Pamirs; and if they chose to pay us a call *via* Chitral, we should be in a pleasant sort of hole, with a detachment locked up in Hunza and no help to be got till June. I'm afraid it's worrying the Colonel; but one can only hope for the best—"

The flap-flapping of grass slippers announced Carrie's approach, and Lyndsay looked up sharply, dreading disturbance for the boy. Upon her appearance in the doorway Lyndsay lifted a warning finger; and for a space she stood silent, hands clasped upon heaving breasts, eyes rivetted on the sleeper;—an unlovely figure of tragedy, in dingy white petticoat and magenta dressing jacket, her rope of hair making an ink-streak between her shoulders. Then, with a ponderous effort at lightness she flapped across the room, and sinking on her knees clutched Lyndsay's arm.

"Lindsee, is it *oll* over now? He will live—you are quite sure?"

"Almost sure, if we are very careful. Carrie—Carrie—"

she whispered urgently. "You'll wake him if you go on like that!

For Carrie had collapsed upon her shoulder, a damp incoherent mass of sobs and broken speech.

"Linsee, it is *oll* you. Jim said so. You have saved my Montee-boy, the beam of my eye! And I have been bad to you—a snake in sheep's clothing. But now—you may set foot on my neck—"

"Oh my dear, do hush—for the boy's sake," Lyndsay entreated. "Jim will soon be in, and you know how this sort of thing would annoy him. Good-night. Sleep soundly."

And lifted above repulsion by the deep elemental bond of motherhood, she touched the sallow forehead with her lips. Carrie clung the closer, and rained moist kisses on her cheek.

"Veree well. I will go;—but you *are* an angel oll the same—!"

With which incoherent tribute she departed; and Lyndsay, her letter forgotten, lay back in her chair with closed eyes. Almost, sleep had overpowered her; but wrenching herself upright, she returned to her reading. And Videlle, entering five minutes later, found her thus; a square sheet spread out in the circle of light; one hand supporting her head; the delicate lips just parted as if to draw in her breath of mountain air. Details hardly worth recording; but that the glad absorption, revealed in face and pose, before she knew him present, was destined to haunt him for months and vitally to affect the lives of both; as is often the way of trivial chances—if chance there be.

Returning her smile of welcome, he went straight to the bed; and when he came to her the letter lay folded under one hand.

"It is true sleep, isn't it?" she whispered. "The corner turned?"

"Yes. He'll pull through; unless Carrie plays the fool once he's on the up-grade and lets us in for the whole thing over again."

"Oh Jim, she mustn't—after all we've done, you and I."

There was more of weariness than protest in her tone;

and Videlle, laying a hand on her head, pressed it back a little, the better to look into her eyes.

"You've done most of it, Lyn. More than you're fit for, I'm afraid. The boy won't stir for hours. Old Miriam can sit by the door to call me if he wakes. You shall share my supper and then go to bed—eh?"

His hand moved caressingly, and she smiled. "Bed without supper—if I may! I want nothing—but sleep."

"You shall have it, my dear, *plus* a cup of soup. Come along." His glance travelled to the table and a shadow crossed his face. "What's that stuff you were reading?" he asked, advertising knowledge by the fighting note in his voice.

"A letter—from Captain Laurence."

"Captain, is he?"

"Yes—and a V. C."

Impossible to keep the thrill out of her low tone, or the sneer out of his as he answered: "A hero, eh? There'll be no holding him now! And you women are such fools over that sort of thing.—I thought he had given up writing. Started again, has he?"

"Yes."

"At *your* request by any chance?"

"No."

She looked up at him very straightly; and there followed a momentary duel of the eyes. In such a duel the clear conscience is predestined victor; and it was Videlle who looked away discomfited, angered by her serene command of herself and him.

"Come along," he said again, the solicitude gone from his tone.

With a sigh, she rose; and passing out before him, crossed the dining-room, very erect, the Watteau pleat of her gown lending height and dignity to her figure. On the threshold of her room she turned.

"It seems unkind not to stay and have supper. But you know how tired I am. Good-night."

Her voice had the gentle aloofness he had come to know so well. It was the utmost of rebuke he ever had from her; and it hurt far more than a lesser woman's reproaches or tears. But at the moment anger rode him; and being occupied with a corkscrew, he nodded curtly.

"Good-night. I understand."

Three minutes later came a low knocking at her door.

"Lyndsay, here's your soup. May I come in?"

Sighing she slipped into the discarded blue wrapper. "Yes. Come."

She made no forward movement, but stood near the bed's foot, awaiting him; her soft hair loose about her shoulders, framing the exquisite pallor of her face; a vision so fragile, so appealing, that his heart, eternally susceptible to the charm of her, knocked at his ribs. But he knew, none better, that she was not the woman to be insulted one moment and kissed the next.

"Here you are," he said awkwardly, holding out the tray. "I'm sorry I forgot; and—about the other thing."

She took the cup and drained it leisurely, while he waited; his gaze on her face, his jealous, possessive passion—repressed during months of semi-estrangement—goading him to speech, however ill-advised.

"Thank you," she said softly, replacing the cup. "That was very refreshing."

This time she lifted her face for his kiss. The whiteness and weariness of it smote him afresh; but urgent need of speech overruled his natural consideration for her; and depositing his burden, he set light hands on her shoulders.

"Look here, Lyndsay," said he. "I may have gone too far just now. I admit it. But what mortal use was it sending that fellow away, if you encourage him to write you such screeds as the one you were reading in there. Why the deuce can't you drop him outright? That's what I want to know."

Her frown hinted at impatience; and she withdrew herself gently from his touch.

"I'm not given to dropping my friends without rhyme or reason. He asked leave to write; and I said I would answer. He has done nothing to justify me in going back on my word."

"Rather tall, giving a man *carte blanche* to write whenever he pleases!"

"He makes sparing use of it; and I enjoy hearing about his work."

"The subtlest form of flattery, as you know well

enough," he replied sneeringly; his anger rising in proportion to her coolness. "And judging from this last specimen, he makes up for abstemiousness in volume! I suspect it's himself you like hearing about; and he knows it."

"He writes very little of himself. Just what he is doing . . . or reading."

"Well then, if his letters are so impersonal, and so damned interesting, why have you never shown them to me?"

At that her delicate mouth hardened. "Are you determined to make me lose my temper?" she asked, her voice low and vibrant. "You know quite well my feeling about letters . . . real letters. I have never indiscriminately shared my correspondence with you; and I never shall—Oh—!" she turned from him, half angry, half despairing. "What was the good of bringing me soup, if it was only an excuse to worry me about a handful of letters from one of the straightest men I have ever met?"

In a cooler moment the last words would not have been spoken. The impulse to defend Laurence blinded her to the inferred comparison till it was out; and a view of her husband's face in the glass showed how her inadvertent arrow had hit home. She swung round instantly, all tenderness and troubled appeal.

"Dear, I am so sorry . . . I spoke thoughtlessly . . ."

"You spoke your *real* thought by accident," he answered unappeased. "Oh, you're tender-hearted enough. I know that. You wouldn't hurt me wittingly, any more than you'd maim an insect. But the scorn is there, all the same. I have seen it in your eyes. And you admire that Sapper fellow . . . curse him!"

"Just as I admire scores of other men, who put their whole heart into their work."

"Including your husband?" he sneered bitterly.

"Including my husband," she answered in all gentleness; but the devils of doubt and jealousy had him in their grip.

"I am gratified! Still—those 'scores of other men' don't happen to admire you; nor to write you three-volume novels about their blessed work. I'm jealous of the fellow, Lyn. Have been from the start. That's the plain truth."

"Jim—what foolishness! And there is no cause for it. None. We have mutual interests, of course; and I'm sure it's good for a young fellow shut away in the wilds to be in friendly touch with a woman. You see he has no mother or sister—"

"And you felt called upon to play the double *rôle*—eh?"

"Not at all. Only—I remembered the fact when he asked leave to write. And as for his letters—I may choose to keep them to myself, because they are written to me. But if I felt—I could not show them, there would be an end of our friendship—and of them. That's my side of the plain truth, Jim. Can you bring yourself to believe it?"

She spoke slowly, almost wistfully; and before he could answer, she had seen, with that disconcerting clearness of hers, that his "Yes," if spoken, would be but the adding of untruth to unfaith; and the waters came in even unto her soul.

"Lyndsay," he began; but one small, imperious hand warded off his protestation as if it had been a blow.

"No, Jim. Don't perjure yourself on my account. Once—long ago—you made an extravagant speech about the man who doubted me. Does it never strike you, now, that a little less of—that sort of thing, and a little more plain belief in my integrity is what we most need if our union is ever to become—a reality? Have you lived so long without discovering that doubt and suspicion poison everything that is worth having—love, more than all?"

She caught her breath on the last words, and could add no more; for his arms were about her, his breath stirring her hair.

"Lyndsay! You divine little soul! When you speak and look like that, I am ready to believe anything—to swear anything—! That I should doubt you—I, of all men—who am no better than dust under your feet—"

"Oh—oh," she breathed, as if in pain, pressing him from her with both hands. "Will you never understand how such exaggeration hurts me—and how much more it would hurt—if it were true? You know—everyone knows, that a woman wants above all things, to be able—to look up to her husband—"

"And you—?" he questioned sharply.

She turned from him with a pitiful quiver of the lips.

"Is it—altogether—my fault?" Then heart and body weariness overwhelmed her, and once again her hands went to her head. "Oh, in mercy, go now—leave me alone! I am tired—tired out; and sick to death of it all!"

That cry roused the Doctor, the considerate lover he could be on occasion; and taking her gently by the shoulders, he kissed the satin-soft hollow of her temple.

"Darling, I've been a brute to you—for the hundredth time. It would serve me right if you were ill to-morrow. Get to sleep now; and don't worry your poor head about me. Good-night."

"Good-night. You didn't mean to hurt me," she murmured brokenly. "But things are—very difficult—for us both."

"God knows they are!" he agreed, under his breath.

As the door closed behind him, Lyndsay dropped upon the bed without further undressing; and between her closed lids tears forced their way; cold, slow tears, wrung from a dead weight of irremediable pain, tears that brought no relief.

It was thus that Videlle found her, an hour later; one arm flung high on the pillow; all her soft hair spread abroad like floating sea-weed; and covering her cautiously with a shawl, he vowed in his heart never to doubt her, or speak harshly to her again.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

**Oh the little things in this life, that are the big ones all the time, and no one ever suspects them!**

**—De Morgan.**

But though vows may endure for a night, temptation cometh in the morning; and the renewal of discord on that luckless April evening seemed to snap the slender chain forged by a few weeks of mutual work and admiration. No uncommon event, this, in marriages of a certain order. Where love is manifestly unequal, and amalgamation past hoping for, man and wife are quite lamentably at the mercy of all the winds that blow. Yet, for the moment, events of more immediate urgency deferred the hidden, slow-moving tragedy of their disunion.

Lyndsay woke next morning with a headache and "a temperature" that put an end to her services in the sick-room, and merged Videlle's hazy tangle of jealousies and doubts into the elemental dread of losing her altogether. For several days he kept her in bed; neglected his work, and watched anxiously for signs of typhoid; cursing Carrie in his heart. But rest and sleep were all that Lyndsay needed—physically, at least; and while she took her fill of both, Monty was relegated more or less to the tender mercies of his mother. At this stage two strict injunctions sufficed for guidance; no solid food, and no sitting up in bed for twelve days at least.

"Can I trust you to enforce that much?" Videlle had asked, and the covert sneer in his tone sent Carrie's nose several inches into the air.

"Well, indeed! Where is thee difficultee?"

"You will soon see for yourself. And I won't have you worrying Lyn, if the boy gets out of hand. She must go slow just now."

"Worrying Linsee? Of course not, when she has been

so kind. Besides—I am not the fool you think me. A prettee tale, if a mother cannot manage her own child!"

"A very common tale, unfortunately."

"Huh! That is oll *you* know about it! We shall see!"

But her self-confidence was short-lived. She had reckoned without the irritability of convalescence, and the astonishing vitality of youth. In less than a week Richard was sufficiently himself to rebel, weakly yet insistently, against the gratuitous brutality that denied him food when life renascent cried out for it, and his young soul loathed all manner of liquid. More than that, he wanted to sit up and read; to have Lungra—the beloved pariah—on his bed and "help him *shikar* those dam fleas"—Monty's language being culled indiscriminately from barracks and bazaar. As strength increased, the days became one protracted conflict of words and wills; till Carrie began to dread the defeat which she had been industriously preparing for herself ever since she first allowed her son to discover the inter-relation between tears, temper and attainment. Twice he defied her openly and sat upright; only to be thrust down again with a shake of the shoulders far more fatal than the forbidden thing, and thereafter propitated by a damp mingling of kisses and tears.

In this fashion a week slipped by without open mishap; but upon the eighth day rebellion reached its climax. Slight feverish symptoms overnight had led Videlle to emphasize the importance of keeping the boy quiet; but, anxiety being far from him, he had driven Lyndsay to a tennis party that afternoon; and Carrie, with the astonishing insensibility that was hers, decided to have tea in Monty's room, in the belief that it would be more "cheereé" for both. Lack of imagination blinded her to the refined brutality of eating iced cakes and jam sandwiches under the eyes of a starving boy condemned to a few bread and butter wafers; a boy, moreover, whose primitive impulses had never known the curb of an opposing will—his own or another's. A battle royal was speedily in progress: tears, entreaties, and a torrent of bilingual abuse, unfit for the lips of ten years old. The last shot, coupled with a practical threat, carried the day.

"You are so damn greedee. You want to eat it olly our-

self! But if you won't spare me two little cakes,—onlee two,—I will jump right out and snatch them under your veree nose."

He flung back the sheet; but, before he could move, his mother's hands were on him, pinning him down.

"Montee—Montee!—you are a bad wicked boy—" she cried, on the brink of tears. "I am *not* greedee. It is *hukm**—from Uncle Jim—"

"Huh! Uncle Jim can go to *Jehannum*!† If we keep *choop*,‡ he will never know. One little cake—*meri ma, meri piari má*§—and I will be a mouse one whole hour. Then you can read that 'Sorrowing Satan' stuff you are so mad upon."

This sudden change of tactics from assault to sugar-coated strategy effectually routed Carrie.

"After oll Jim *said* he must be kept quiet," was the excuse with which she stilled the fearful flutterings of conscience, as her son clutched the coveted morsel with trembling fingers.

"Eat it slowlee, Montee-boy," she pleaded. "And for the Lord's sake never let on to Uncle Jimmee that you made me do this. He would thrash you like he did when you ate all the arsenic balls."

For answer Monty bolted the cake in three mouthfuls; and his sceptical grin upon the last warning justified Finlay's version of his name. As for Carrie, an hour's revelling in the lurid drama of Lucifer among the Moderns made an iced cake, more or less, seem too trivial a vehicle for tragedy. She kept her own counsel, none the less, and Monty followed suit. But they reckoned without Nature, the great marplot, who could by no means be pressed into their conspiracy of silence.

With the return of fever, Videlle discovered grave, unaccountable symptoms of relapse. Carrie met his questionings with stout denials, that weakened upon repetition, and finally quavered into tearful admission that the child had worried her life out till she let him nibble a corner of one small cake. Videlle's knowledge of mother and son quadrupled the admission; and his irrepressible "Good God!" so startled her that she clutched his arm.

* Order. † Hell. ‡ Silent. § My mother, my darling mother.

"Onlee one wee corner, Jimmee. It *could* not harm. And you are so clever. You will put him oll right, I am sure of it."

Videlle shrugged his shoulders.

"Wish *I* was. I'm deuced sorry for you, old girl; and I'll do my best. But all the cleverness on earth isn't a match for human folly."

From Lyndsay he did not conceal his anger or his conviction that Carrie had cut her own throat this time with a vengeance.

"I've wired for a nurse, of course," he added with decision. "But I sha'n't tell her for a day or two. I'm sick of scenes."

"Oh Jim—she'll go distracted. And I could manage it—really."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, you little saint! We'd have *you* down with it next. You can go to your beloved Mrs. Rivers for a week. She's always glad to give you a holiday from your home—and your husband."

"If you put it that way, I shall refuse to go."

"Will you? I doubt it. The double attraction would prove too strong!"

She winced and touched his arm. "Do you know, Jim, it's not always easy to believe in your—caring. You seem to take pleasure in hurting me without a cause."

He glanced at her keenly.

"Do I hurt you, Lyn? I'm sorry. I didn't think *you* cared enough to mind. You must go, anyway; and we won't squabble over it. There's trouble enough in this ill-fated bungalow without that."

A light kiss on her hair concluded the matter; and two days later, for all Carrie's entreaties, tears, upbraidings, Lyndsay left the house in Mrs. Rivers' victoria, with a troubled sense of deserting a doomed ship. Her heart ached for the ungoverned, unlovable woman who had apparently sealed her own doom; and although she knew the boy to be in good hands, knew that in opposition to her husband's wish she had no right to run deliberate risk, the sense of desertion remained. She had enough of detachment and understanding to see her act from Carrie's distorted point of view; to realize that if the boy

succumbed she would account Lyndsay indirectly responsible for her loss.

Within a week the brief, desperate struggle was over. In Videlle's "ill-fated bungalow" Montgomery Vansittart lay very still; done to death, in plain terms, by a devoted mother's incapacity to learn the first great lesson of love; and Lyndsay, driving round two days later, with unalloyed sympathy in her heart, was denied admittance to her own house. Then she knew that her weeks of ungrudging self-sacrifice were, to all outward seeming, as gold flung into the gutter; that life in the hospital bungalow—difficult enough since the child's coming—would be further complicated by an undernote of reproach that she could not but feel in every fibre of her being.

As for Jim, it was easy to foretell the effect on his nerves and temper of a house more than ever divided against itself. The little she had seen of him, since her departure, augured ill for the home-coming that could not much longer be deferred. His work had been heavy and harassing; their three short drives together had proved little more than outlets for repressed irritability; and Lyndsay, sympathetic as she was, had felt too tired, in every way, to cope with him in his most impossible mood, when a word, a smile, or even a silence inadvertently prolonged might set the sparks flying.

Also—troubles being by nature gregarious—a letter from Gilgit must needs arrive during her absence; too soon, in Videlle's opinion, after the last. As a matter of fact Laurence rarely wrote twice in a month; and on this occasion, apologized, half seriously, for "the infliction!" But that Videlle could not know. For him the fact refuted at least one of Lyndsay's statements; and threw the shadow of doubt over all. The curse of the bone-bred liar was upon him; tainting faith and reason itself; so that he could not believe, whole-heartedly, even this one woman, who stood proven the soul of sincerity and truth. He had endured a bad half hour alone with that envelope, debating whether to suppress it altogether, or to take toll of its contents in passing. But at the last uprightness had prevailed; not so much for its own sake, as because he saw his temptation suddenly through Lyndsay's eyes, and the devil within shrank ashamed from their

unflinching "Thou shalt not." The risk of being discovered in a second deception, however trivial, was scarcely worth a passing satisfaction which might prove the reverse, after all.

But in delivering the letter he could not refrain from comment; a comment, unhappily in bad taste and the wrong tone of voice. Lyndsay received it with the faint lift of her brows that at times maddened him past endurance; and as they happened to be out driving she pocketed the letter unread. Act and gesture pricked him to further unwisdom.

"Keeping your *bonne bouche*, so as to enjoy it all by yourself—eh?" And again the tone was more offensive than the words.

But it provoked no retort. She drew out the letter, merely, and read it, very much at her leisure, while he sat cursing himself for a cad and a fool; gleaning an occasional line from the tail of his eye, and realizing too late that the postponement of her pleasure had probably been a simple act of consideration for his feelings. They had not found a great deal to say for the rest of the drive; and Lyndsay had lain awake that night wondering whether, after all, even the letters would have to be given up.

That clashes of this kind alternated with interludes of tenderness goes without saying; in fact Mrs. Rivers—with her formidable straightness of insight and speech—described him to a friend, at this period, as belonging to the exasperating order of husband "whose disagreeableness is the measure of his devotion." In such circumstances Lyndsay can hardly be blamed if she dreaded the near prospect of return to the bungalow; and her relief was patent when Videlle looked in—the day after her fruitless call on Carrie—to suggest that it might be well to put off coming home till the end of the week. Finding her alone in the drawing-room with her child he was able to make his reasons clear.

"Carrie is all to pieces still; half crazy, I sometimes think. And, of course, for the present one is bound to make allowances. But it will all come square in time."

Lyndsay shook her head dubiously. "Will it? I am not so sure. She will blame me—to the end."

"Not you alone, Lyn."

"Yes. She probably believes that if I had insisted, you would have given way. Perhaps you would. But insistence seemed unfair—on you."

"Deuced unfair; and worse than useless. So don't go weaving a hair shirt for yourself out of the notion that you might have done more than you did. Precious few women would have done as much. Carrie brought everything on herself. And later, if she talks any rot about you, she must be made to understand—"

"Is she, d'you think, the sort of person who can be made to understand? I have not found her so. And I suppose—now, she won't trouble about the Hills?" Her tone held no complaint; but its very apathy troubled Videlle. They were standing by the great Chesterfield couch, where little Monica lay asleep; and he slipped an arm round his wife, drawing her closer.

"No, not at present. But when she pulls up a bit, we must see what can be arranged. She's pretty well in the depths, and I'm worried to death with work. 'Fraid you have a rough time of it between us—you long-suffering little woman."

She leaned lightly against him, a half smile on her lips. "But you're happy enough here, anyway,devoting yourself to the one person on earth—eh?" he went on, slanting his head to get a better view of her. "How are the teeth? Still troublesome?"

"Yes. We have very broken nights. But in spite of pain and fever she's never fretful, really—"

"H'm—very much your daughter! If she manages to grow up like her mother, I shall forgive her a good deal. Does that satisfy you?"

"No. You are going to forgive all—some day."

Her smile deepened on the words; but in kissing her he found salt moisture on his lips.

"Crying, Lyn? A serious symptom—for you! Tired? —Is she?"

"A little bit."

"You want a good stiff tonic, that's all about it. I'll have one made up and send it round to-morrow."

But throughout the drive home his thoughts dwelt on the gradual change that had crept over Lyndsay in the

past few months; a change more vital than loss of colour and appetite and zest. True, the grace and sweetness in her were unfailing, for she was of those whom knowledge and adversity may sadden, but embitter—never. Yet, beneath her gentleness, he divined a languor of heart and brain, an apathetic resignation, such as she had shown at the prospect of hot weather darkened by Carrie's morose grief and resentment. All the natural resilience of youth seemed gone out of her. No tonic for her complaint like the strong wine of Himalayan breezes; change of atmosphere, mental and physical. He admitted the fact with quite unusual honesty. Yet his determination to keep her with him suffered no change. That she would refuse to go with Carrie was certain; and his every instinct recoiled from the idea of sending her alone. If Mrs. Rivers had been going, then—but, in truth, he was devoutly thankful that the Commissioner's ill-health put that hypothesis out of court. After all, other wives stayed down year after year; and since she herself was not likely to propose leaving him, he considered the matter settled.

That Mrs. Rivers might arrive at conclusions similar to his own, never occurred to him. Still less did he dream that already her suggestion of a change to the hills had been smilingly set aside. For Monica Rivers, however, adoption meant more than the superficial might suppose. She held herself hardly less responsible for one daughter than for the other; nor could all Lyndsay's loyalty and reserve blind her to the underlying strain and discord that bid fair to break the young wife's heart. Few women of brain and character can spend five and twenty years in India without becoming deeply and widely read in the book of human tragedy; and in Lyndsay's smiling apathy Mrs. Rivers recognised the protective shell unconsciously formed by sensitive souls for whom suffering threatens to be the dominant factor of life. She realized also that the hope of better things had been checked, if not crushed outright by the advent of the child; yet in her belief it needed only the pangs of separation to convince Videlle that, failure or no, his love and admiration for the woman stood supreme. For both, a sharp break in the continuity of discord was essential;

and in the last resort Mrs. Rivers would unhesitatingly appeal to Videlle himself. But, being far too wise to hustle events that might take the right turn unaided, she let Lyndsay depart without further mention of the subject; and the week following brought to birth an unlooked for series of happenings that changed the current of more lives than one.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

> Boldly she sings to the merry tune she marches;
> Sweet is her shape, and sweeter unpossessed.
> Sweeter; for she is what my heart, first awaking,
> Whispered the world was: morning light is she.
> Love that so desires fain would keep her changeless;
> Fain would fling the net, and fain have her free.
>
> —G. MEREDITH.

IT was upon the fifth day after Lyndsay's home-coming that Monica Rivers drove round to suggest polo as an objective for a leisurely outing; and, entering the bungalow unannounced, discovered a very white and prostrate Lyndsay prone among sofa cushions. Her attempt to rise brought the older woman swiftly to her side.

"Darling child, don't move. You look a wreck! What's the meaning of it?"

Lyndsay's reassuring smile gleamed wan as an April sunbeam after rain.

"Nothing alarming! Only—I was stupid enough to faint just now—"

"And why, pray?"

"Weak-mindedness, I suppose! No self-respecting woman faints in these days. I was tired after a long drive in the sun, and Carrie—"

"Ah—?"

Something in the tone made Lyndsay set her lips, though the smile still lingered in her eyes. "No. You sha'n't hear any more!"

"I must and shall, you angelic little fool! Has she been riding rough-shod over you, already?"

"Oh, she's really not accountable for half she says, poor soul," Lyndsay answered evasively. "The sight of me with Baby drives her half mad, I think; and she talks wildly. But one must make allowances."

"By all means, my dear, every allowance—short of allowing her to trample on you. Your husband—"

Lyndsay's hand closed sharply upon her friend's. "Jim is *not* to know."

"That's as you choose, Lyndsay. But I may end in feeling bound to convince him that my prescription for you is worth more than a surgery full of his drugs."

"No, please—don't talk of that. It's only tantalizing."

"Well, well, dear, I won't bother you now. But if you feel better this evening would you care to come round to dinner? I'll send the victoria."

"It would be lovely! Only I don't know—about Jim?"

"Oh, if your Jim makes difficulties, bring him along too."

"I will—if I can! He is apt to be tired in the evening. But still—may I leave it open?"

"Of course. I'll send the carriage on the chance."

An hour later she drove leisurely homeward, the polo forgotten, her mind full of the dear adopted daughter, who had come to fill so great a space in her heart. If things had arrived at such a pass that Lyndsay should be subjected to insult and diatribe from Carrie, and in return shield her from Videlle, surely the situation demanded definite action. No vague suggestions, but a plan, feasible and ready-made, must be submitted for his consideration. And while her practical brain marshalled details and possibilities, a winged inspiration, flitting into their midst, routed them all. Kashmir! The very thing. She would speak of it to-night: and entering her drawing-room in a mood of unusual elation, beheld her husband, leaning on the mantelpiece in an attitude of unmistakable dejection.

Hearing her, he righted himself and smiled. With a pang she noted that the lines of his face seemed more deeply scored; the greyness about the lips more marked. But these were not matters for speech.

"Why, Alec—home so early?" she greeted him briskly. "I thought you were to be late?"

"So did I. But I felt shaky all the morning; and after tiffin—I went over to Dr. Calderon's."

Fear leapt to her eyes; and he, still smiling, set both hands upon her; long-fingered, nervous hands, whose veins and knuckles stood out sharply.

"Yes, my dear," he said, as if she had spoken. "It

has come at last—the summons. He insists on a specialist; urgent leave; and getting home as soon as may be."

"For good?"

"Yes. But I think—not for long." His tone was steady, almost matter-of-fact. "Calderon didn't mean me to realize—that. But he is a good-hearted fellow, and his voice betrayed him."

The slow, difficult tears of middle-age hung heavy on her lashes; but blinking them back, she answered him with an equal steadiness.

"Dearest—doctors are constantly mistaken. Of course we must do what this man says. But having hoped against hope for so long, we can surely keep it up—God helping us—to the last."

His hands tightened their hold.

"Monica, what a wife you are! In twenty-seven years I can't recall your having failed me once, at a difficult turn of the road."

"I could wish no prouder record," she told him, a break in her voice. After a quarter of a century of comradeship it was the man's first articulate tribute; and it glorified this, the saddest moment she had ever known.

For a space they stood together thus, looking backward through the corridors of the years. Then the woman leaned closer, and their long kiss of passion and pain was, as it were, a seal set upon the past; a mute acknowledgment that "life, with all it holds of joy and woe" had been tried in the fire and proven—very good.

When at last they stood apart their eyes met in the smile of every day.

"I must go now," the man said quietly. "I have letters to write before tea."

"You would rather be alone, Alec?"

"Yes." With a hand on the curtains he turned. "Where's the child?"

"Lunching at the Stuarts. She'll be home soon."

"*She* need not know—the whole truth. You'll manage that—somehow—"

"Trust me."

"Always have done, my dear."

Alone she sank into a chair, hiding her eyes with one hand. Her thoughts, deserting the past, explored the

corridors ahead; corridors empty of the man whose silent, forceful presence had stood always in the fore-front of her life; and tears that cut like knives found their way between her fingers. There is recognised tragedy in the snatching apart of bride and groom at the outset of the journey; but those who confound tragedy with romance overlook the crueller cleavage that parting brings to a man and woman who have been steadily growing into one another for close on thirty years; and although Monica Rivers had long foreknown the inevitable, she had never looked it in the face till now.

She was thankful for the light footsteps and low-toned whistling that wrenched her back to present, practical needs. With the child the old pretence could still be kept up; and there was comfort in it—of a kind. Gwen, in a primrose-coloured muslin, softly befrilled, and a wide-brimmed hat, whereon cowslips clustered, seemed an embodiment of spring, and all that it signifies of life and hope resurgent; yet the spirit of the doomed, grey-faced man, who was her father, looked, with startling verisimilitude out of her golden-brown eyes.

"You here, beloved?" was her word of greeting. "I imagined you at the polo with Lyn."

"She wasn't up to it, poor dear. So I came home; and I'm glad I did." She paused, and took possession of the girl. "Darling, I've sad news for you. Dad has not been so well lately. You've noticed it?"

"Of course I have." Her young face was all gravity now; the look of her father stronger than ever.

"He's had an anxious winter with the Frontier so unsettled; and has been overworking as usual—"

"I like men who overwork," Gwen announced with decision.

"So do I. Only—at his age—when they are none too strong—"

"Mum! He isn't *ill*—is he?"

"Not exactly; but—" it was difficult work—"Dr. Calderon advises long leave at once; and the chances are—we shall not come back to India."

To her astonishment and dismay the glad-hearted girl burst into tears, burying her face, child-fashion on her mother's shoulder to the detriment of the cowslip hat.

"Gwen, my dear one, don't take it so hard," the mother pleaded, her own control difficult to maintain.

"Will England—make him better?"

"Rest and change may do him great good," Mrs. Rivers answered steadily. "At least he must have every chance."

"Yes—yes. It's wicked to mind going so much—when it's for him."

"Dearest, do you mind as much as all that?"

"Yes, I mind—tremendously, so will Dad." She spoke more bravely now; lifting her head, and brushing away the traces of her April shower. "We three love India—don't we, Mum? The bigness and even the terribleness of it. It was my dream—to marry and spend most of my life out here. But now—"

"Well, my child, you've had chances; more than one."

Everett, she knew, had spoken twice; and there had been others.

"Chances are no use," two-and-twenty pronounced sagaciously. "It's *the* chance; and that may never come! It certainly won't—at Home; and I suppose I shall take up modelling or enamelling or some such futility!" She was silent a moment, contemplating the toe of her shoe and absently fingering her fine gold chain. "You believe very much in marriage, don't you, beloved? It's our one vocation, with a capital V, and so on?"

"Yes. That's my old-fashioned opinion! Of course there are scores of other useful vocations open to a woman nowadays, though none, I think, in which she can fulfill herself so completely and happily as in marriage."

"Not marriage—with anyone?"

"No—no, child. God forbid!"

Gwen gave a little nod without looking up. "Well, then—what can a girl do if the one man she has ever troubled her head about is so horribly sensible that he prefers—an older woman?"

In that question Mrs. Rivers found an answer to the why and wherefore of many things.

"Are you so sure he prefers—me?" she ventured, smiling; and Gwen drew herself up with a superb assumption of dignity.

"Mum—what *are* you talking about?"

"A certain officer who wears his right sleeve pinned to his coat, and hangs round the older woman simply to keep in touch with the bright particular star that he believes to be quite out of reach!" She paused, watching the revelation sink into Gwen's brain; the warm blood deepen in her cheek.

"How—how stupid of him!" she commented under her breath.

"A rather engaging form of stupidity! Not—" Mrs. Rivers broke off short; for the curtains parted to admit Khudah Bux, *Chuprassi.*

"Finlin Sahib," he announced gravely.

"*Salaam do,*" Mrs. Rivers answered, unmoved; and the blood mounted even to Gwen's forehead.

"How cruel of you to tell me! I shall never be able to look him in the face again."

"So much the better, Gwendolen. A little less assurance in you might breed a little more in him."

"Well, I won't stay and 'breed assurance' now, anyway." And the tail of her dress slipped out of sight as Finlay entered the room.

Once again Monica Rivers must needs endure the ordeal of retailing a revised version of her husband's news; and Finlay's manner of receiving it convinced her that she had done well to speak to Gwen. He listened without interruption; his eyes mechanically tracing the recurrence of two interwoven designs upon the carpet; the fingers of his clenched hand moving restlessly now and again.

"Hard luck—all round," he said at last. "This house has been more of a home to me than any in India. And your husband will feel it terribly, handing over the reins to a newcomer at the present juncture of affairs. I suppose a man never quite realizes what Indian service means to him till he gets the order to quit. And—Miss Rivers—does she know yet?"

The attempt at unconcern failed signally.

"Yes. It upset her more than I thought possible, poor child."

The silence lasted a full three minutes; then Finlay looked up, his pleasant, ugly face set in lines of resolve.

"Mrs. Rivers, I imagine you know by now that I would give all the world to make her—my wife?"

"Yes. I have thought so for some time; and wondered a little at your backwardness."

"Wondered, have you? To me it seemed a flagrant impossibility. Peshawur's full of good-looking young fellows, with fair prospects and—the usual complement of limbs. D'you really think I should have a ghost of a chance?"

"That's for you to discover," Gwen's mother answered, smiling upon him very kindly. "But as we are leaving for good, it might be only fair on the child to give her the opportunity of saying 'No'!"

His long mouth twitched with amusement.

"I never saw it in that light! And—I have your leave? Her father wouldn't object?"

"Quite the reverse."

"Is she here? Could I see her—now?"

He rose abruptly, as if fearing, Acres-like, that valour might sneak off at the critical moment; and Mrs. Rivers rose also.

"She's somewhere in the garden, grieving her heart out. It would be an act of charity to turn her thoughts into a fresh channel!"

Standing alone in the verandah, he sighted her afar off:—a gleam of light upon a shadowed seat; her hat flung aside, her chin cradled in her hands: and passion, straining at the leash, was checked by the old haunting dread of failure, the piercing consciousness of disparity between his battered self and her gallant, untarnished maidenhood. Since losing his arm, the barrier of the years had loomed more formidable than ever. Six months had not inured him to the miseries and indignities of partial helplessness; and only the mellow nature of the man had saved him from the bitterness which corrodes. That desire should be mutual seemed a consummation past belief. Yet his faith in Mrs. Rivers was absolute. She would not have encouraged him even indirectly without some foundation.

And in the strength of that belief he crossed the unshadowed lawn that divided him from the desire of his

heart. At his approach she sat upright and changed colour, avoiding the directness of his gaze. For the first time he saw her openly perturbed by his presence; and emotion, clutching at his throat, made speech difficult.

"Very busy thinking?" he asked. "May I interrupt?"

"I am honoured!" She made way for him at her left hand; but with a smile half tragical he sat down on her right. "Couldn't you find Mum?"

"Yes, I found her. Why d'you ask?"

"Oh because—" Again that delicious embarrassment, veiled eyes and flying colour. Yesterday she would have answered frankly, "Because she is your friend." But to-day she must needs shield herself behind lowered lids and evasion. "Because—I wondered if you knew about going Home—altogether."

"Yes. She told me. It must be a blow to your father, with the Gilgit Frontier so unsettled. In fact—it's a blow to us all."

"It's horrid—horrid—horrid!" she murmured vehemently. "I can't bear that Father should be ill; and I can't bear saying good-bye to India."

She spoke, looking away across the garden, that he might not suspect her nearness to the indignity of tears. One dark curl curved caressingly over her ear, and he noted the pulsing of a blue vein in the transparency of her temple. Here, surely, was the given moment. Yet the bald words, "I love you," "Will you marry me?" were all that occurred to him; and for the life of him he could not bring them out. There had been so little in their frank relation to warrant them. Instinct and temperament impelled him rather to feel his way.

"Well—there are men in Peshawur who would be glad —and proud to be the means of keeping you out here for good."

Tone and suggestion set a dimple in her check. She saw whither he was trying to lead her; and a young spirit of perversity danced in her like a wind-flower in a breeze.

"I only know of—two! But one couldn't make a convenience of a man—like that. At least, I couldn't!"

His voice dropped a note; and his arm almost brushed hers.

"But the man might—prefer to be accepted—as a convenience, sooner than—lose all."

"Might he?" she pondered doubtfully, caressing the idea. "Perhaps. But—even so, it would be unfair to both. I gave you credit for a higher ideal of marriage!"

His smile had a tinge of the old surface cynicism. "I'm afraid ideals don't count for much when a man wants a girl more than anything else in life—when he has been wanting her desperately, hopelessly, for more than two years.—Gwen!" His hand covered both hers; and the warm blood, sweeping over her cheeks and neck invaded her temples. "Couldn't you—in time—care enough—?"

"To accept you as a convenience?" she queried, lifting light-filled eyes to his.

"Dearest—don't be cruel!"

She leaned just near enough to touch him.

"I'm not cruel. I couldn't be—to you—"

Then his arm went round her, and her face was hidden against him, while he held her, with an awed, reverential tenderness, marvelling at the great good that had come to him unsought. At last he found speech—inadequate enough. But for both the time-honoured duet was new, with the eternal newness of Spring's reiterate word.

"Tell me—darling, why couldn't you be cruel to me?"

"You know."

"Yes. But why—?"

"Because I—I love you.—Is that right?"

"Immeasurably right! Since when?"

"Since always—I think."

"Even though I've no right arm to defend you with?"

"Oh hush, please! It was only after—it happened, that I knew how much—I cared."

"God! What a blind fool I've been!"

"Yes. I used to think so sometimes—in politer language!"

"But you don't now?"

She shook her head, and the dark curls brushed his cheek.

"This is the most profoundly sensible moment of your life!" she declared with a sigh of satisfaction as he prisoned her closer. "You see, as you couldn't very well

marry Mother, your devotion to her seemed such waste. It's much sounder economy this way. Don't you think so, too?" She looked up now; her young face, with all its faults and irregularities, transfigured by a radiance above and beyond beauty. "Oh it's lovely! I never thought it would happen!"

"No more did I!" he answered, catching her spirit. "It's just a fairy dream, we are dreaming together; and I shall wake presently in my bungalow, sadder and wiser than ever!" Then as her eyes flashed laughter into his, the marvel of it all overwhelmed him afresh. "Gwen—is it truthfully true? I can't believe it, even now!"

"Oh yes you can, you foolish—Julian! At least, you will—in a minute!" One hand stole up to his empty sleeve, and at the touch of her lips on his, doubt and sadness, and wisdom evaporated, like ghosts at sunrise.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

> Evil or good may be better or worse
> In the human heart: but the mixture of both
> Is a marvel, and a curse.
>
> —BROWNING.

ON that same evening Videlle sat in his study, scowling at a blank sheet of paper and chewing the stump of a cigar. Close to his elbow stood a tumbler of whisky and water, many shades too deep in tone. Nominally, he was engaged in making out his plague report for the month. Actually, he was damning the complications of life in general, and of his own life in particular. This time of the evening most often found him in the Club card-room; but of late his "luck" had been so uniformly bad and his losses so heavy, that to-night, after a disastrous hour of baccarat and vingt-et-un, aggravated by desperation stakes, he had come home to glean temporary consolation from the contents of his private cupboard, and a pretence at work. Of the real thing he had a surfeit during the winter. Recrudescence of plague in the city and outlying villages had made heavy demands upon him mentally and physically; and the hot weather seemed to promise small mitigation of the scourge. For Videlle, in these days, added strain meant increasing dependence on the whisky bottle; and a strong head enabled him to overstep limits without seriously blurring his brain or unsteadying his hand. Yet continued excess was not without its effect on the entire man; and Lyndsay might have found his unreasonable outbursts of temper less puzzling had she suspected the truth.

A week of intermittent irritability and depression had culminated to-night in a peculiarly virulent attack of "the blue devils," those mythical generators of half the miseries of man. Since Monty's death the whole house seemed impregnated with Carrie's sullen grief, varied at intervals by hysterical railings, now against herself

or Lyndsay, now against Providence, the immemorial scapegoat for human folly and sin. To Videlle it seemed clear that, knowing herself responsible, she deliberately sought refuge from torment in the flagrant fiction that Lyndsay might have saved the boy had she remained. He had realized also, since Lyndsay's return, that she had good grounds for doubting whether Carrie could ever be "made to understand." Time might be trusted to blunt the sharp edges of resentment; and till then—in Videlle's phraseology—"Hell for all three!"

Lyndsay, at all events, kept her share of Hell under lock and key; mitigating pain, as brave souls can, by disregard of its presence. Finding her asleep on his return, he had left her unmolested; merely questioning Carrie, who had replied casually that she had been out in the sun with the child and seemed tired. But Videlle had detected more than mere fatigue in the blue shadows under the eyes, and the tell-tale droop of the lips. They haunted him now, as he sat alone; and once again conscience hinted at the virtue of an immediate move to the Hills. Yet he deliberately edged away from the thought as the uncheerful giver edges away from the plate in Church. His very failure to capture the essence of the woman made him cling the more tenaciously to mere sight and sound and touch of her. A great mutual love—the one fire on earth that could have fused such mighty opposites—has nothing to fear from separation, beyond the inevitable pain. But selfish passion is no miracle-worker, nor bridge-builder; and Videlle dreaded lest even a few months of detachment might loosen the slender hold he had gained upon her in two years of marriage.

And if two years had wrought such small result, what of those yet to come? To-night, in his black mood he saw no glimmer of hope on the horizon. Rather did the passing of the days enforce fuller conviction of their mutual inability to override the racial and temperamental disparities that so inexorably held them apart. There were moments when that conviction almost turned love to hatred; not the chill hatred of dislike; but hate, the evil genius of a passion corroded by self-inflicted jealousies, and misgivings lest another should reap where he had sown. In such moods of unreasoning exaggeration

Lyndsay's recent assurances counted for nothing. Naturally she would deny his cause for jealousy in any case; though deepening knowledge of her convinced him that in the face of direct denial he dared not insult her by any further exhibition of his own incapacity to credit an instinct for truth as radical as his own instinct for prevarication.

With a muttered oath he emptied his glass, and opened the cupboard at his left hand to replenish it. As he drew out the cork with an audible sound the latch of the door clicked upward.

"Who's that?" he demanded sharply, pushing bottle and glass out of sight and shutting the cupboard with a slam.

"I—Lyndsay."

"You? Oh, come along." She came, accordingly, an open letter in her hand. "Had a good sleep?"

"Yes. I feel much fresher. I'm sorry if I interrupted."

"No—no. What is it? I heard a carriage."

"Mrs. Rivers' victoria. She came this afternoon and asked would we go round to dinner."

The scowl, that had lifted at her presence, lowered again.

"Hang the woman! Hasn't she seen enough of you lately?"

"I thought you might not feel inclined," Lyndsay went on, ignoring the question, "so I left it open. But now she has sent the carriage with a special invitation. Gwen is just engaged to Captain Finlay. He will be there, and they want me very much to come over and wish them luck. Mrs. Rivers says she would be so pleased if you care to come too."

"H'm! She'd be finely disconcerted if I took her at her word! Accept for yourself, if it amuses you. *I* have too much pride to intrude where I am obviously not required."

To Lyndsay the false humility of these injured-martyr moods was peculiarly exasperating; but knowledge that many things combined to harass him checked her impulse to hasty retort.

"That really means you don't want to go," she said with a rather uncertain smile. "And, after all, I can easily refuse. Mrs. Rivers will understand—"

"That you have a selfish beast of a husband who grudges you an evening's pleasure because he is not in the vein for it! That's about the measure of her understanding!"

"Oh Jim! Don't be so unjust. Of course I should refuse on my own account; and I'm quite willing to stay at home. May I have a sheet of paper?"

But the man born with a taste for martyrdom resents ameliorations; and Videlle waved his wife irritably aside.

"Go, my dear—go, for heaven's sake, to your precious friends who make so much of you! You're always far happier with them than with your husband."

For a second her lip quivered; then she steadied it and turned quietly away.

"I must hurry or I shall be late," she said, as if to herself.

A word in reply would have fired irritability to violence; but he had seen the tremor of pain, and her silence heightened its effect.

"Lyn—Lyndsay!" he called, as the latch fell behind her. But his voice came hoarsely with a break in it, and she either did not or would not hear. In the latter case he knew the futility of following her. Besides, she was in a hurry; and he too had begun to weary of emotional interludes that brought them little or no nearer the desired goal.

Leaning an elbow on the table, he covered his eyes with one hand;—and the blue devils, returning in their legions, got hold upon him afresh.

What fiend possessed him that he should so love her and so wound her in one breath? he asked himself fiercely; and shunned the obvious answer that the fiend in question was no other than the enemy men put into their mouths to steal away their brains. None the less remorse, goading him like an iron ankus, plunged him into depths of morbid self-abasement. Gracious memories of her thronged his brain—tormenting him; memories of her exquisite gentleness and patience throughout the boy's illness; her readiness for further sacrifices; and the uncomplaining sweetness with which she had accepted the prospect of a second hot weather under conditions as trying as could well be imagined. Yet, through all her charm and lovableness, ran the undernote of tragedy;

the proven impossibility of true union; and for the first time he frankly acknowledged the wrong done to her, not only by perversion of facts, but in pressing his suit at a time when the greatness of her need obscured judgment; and in hurrying on the marriage, lest she wake to clearer perception while retreat was yet possible. He, who had seen that gulfs of race and temperament divided them; had seen, also, that no passion burned beneath the warm-hearted tenderness she mistook for love; he who had dared to marry her in the belief that, failing all else, possession would suffice, now reaped for reward the knowledge that he had irreparably spoilt her life; and, by a natural sequence, his own.

Yes—in plain terms it amounted to that. And she—? Had she ever, in the privacy of her own soul, acknowledged the truth? Was she, in spite of denials, eating her heart out for love of that accursed Sapper in whom he grudgingly recognised the finer attributes of manhood Nature had denied to himself?

His heated brain found the notion hideously probable; and, as if in further corroboration, memory flashed upon it a vision, clear as actuality—his wife's face poring over a certain letter, her lips apart, her spirit so enthralled that his own footsteps passed unheard. More than once the picture had returned to discomfit him, and its persistence now, seemed silently to attest their twofold tragedy; silently to arraign him as its primal cause. Had it then come to this—that he who loved her, with a fervour none the less intense because it was rooted in egotism, stood proven, every way, a stone of stumbling in her path? And—in that case—?

His morbid musings were startlingly cut short. It was as if chain lightning had blazed through his brain. Her life was not spoilt past mending, if—portentous if—he chose to extinguish his own.

For a while he sat very still, confronting the preposterous idea that seemed thrust upon him from without rather than born from within.

Viewed as a vaguely colossal possibility, it fired him. He saw himself exalted to heights of heroism beside which Laurence's achievement shrank to insignificance —the regulation courage of a soldier in discharge of his

duty; saw Lynsday compelled, at last, to the admiration he craved of her scarcely less than her love. For the idea presupposed her cognizance of his motive. There you reach the black core of egoism! So to die that the world should not suspect his martyrdom—was conceivable. Higher, he could not rise; nor yet face the fact that by condemning her to the torment of knowledge he would render his own attempt at reparation null and void. Even in this supreme moment the main rays of thought were focussed on himself; on the dramatic effect of a crowning proof of devotion that should move Lyndsay to unwilling admiration, even to tears—for how long—? And after—?

That poignant question pricked the soaring bubble of his magnanimity, and brought him to earth with a shock of relief; a half-hearted conviction there were other things in life than this troublesome craving for the one woman. Besides—he would win her admiration yet, and live to reap the benefit; a decision very much more to the purpose than unhealthy vapourings about amendment.

Five minutes later he could even smile cynically at his "temporary aberration"; significant only as incidental proof of his theory that within the sanest mind there lurks a germ of madness.

"Feverish and over-tired. That's about the tune of it," he muttered, pushing back his chair with a movement of irritation. Upon which conclusion he dropped two quinine tabloids into his tumbler; emptied it at a gulp, and went frowningly into dinner with Carrie. Two more pegs fortified him during the meal, and ensured him a long sleep afterwards in his chair.

## CHAPTER XXX.

I yet have sight beyond the smoke;
And kiss the gods' feet, though they wreck
Upon me, stroke again and stroke;
And this, my seeing, is not weak.
—Francis Thompson.

Lyndsay leaned back at her ease while the victoria rolled leisurely through the *babul*-scented dusk, and a golden moon, poised upon the *sirus*-tops, dappled the world with light. Faint in soul and body from beating ineffectual wings upon the void—to her the veiled beauty of earth and sky seemed to speak peace where there was no peace; and susceptible as she was to Nature's hand upon her heart-strings, to-night they failed to respond. Not that she attached undue importance to her husband's bewildering harshness; but that each incident of the kind bred unceasing weariness of his vacillations from mood to mood that gave her always a sense of walking upon shifting sand; and at thought of the long hot-weather days prisoned in the bungalow with Carrie, her courage almost went to pieces. Probably Jim would take two months leave in August, and persuade Carrie to spend these in Mussoorie. But there were endless weeks to be lived through till then; and the one point of light in the darkness was the certainty that Mrs. Rivers had decided on sending Gwen to the hills with a friend.

Even her joy in little Monica had become, since Monty's death, an affront to the heart-broken mother; and the child, herself a fragile creature, had of late been persistently ailing. More than a few women thus placed would have availed themselves of so creditable an excuse to take her home and remain there indefinitely. But Lyndsay cherished old-fashioned ideals as to marriage and its duties. In her eyes even bitter disillusionment did not exempt man or woman from these last; and by this time disillusionment was cruelly complete. Inch by inch, with his own hands, the man was killing such love and tenderness as had sur-

vived the shock of that November night; till a stunned conviction of the hopelessness of it all had settled down upon her spirit, like a fog. While there remains something to fight for, courage can breast the waves of disaster undismayed. It is the futility of effort that kills. Hence the increasing quiescence that troubled both husband and friend; and to-night her storm-driven soul sounded the deeper depths of despair.

A procession of grey thoughts being poor companions, it was a relief when the carriage swung through white gate-posts and drew up suddenly, behind a dogcart that gave to view the silhouetted heads and shoulders of two men. Finlay sprang out first, and the other followed;—broader of build, topping him by a half a head.

Lyndsay sat upright, a catch in her breath, a strange fluttering at her throat. Impossible! Could it be—?

Her answer was a laugh that struck a shaft of light through the gloom within, and scattered her grey thoughts like a bevy of startled doves.

Surprise and emotion struck something too sharply upon despair. For an instant she suffered the bewilderment of one who passes abruptly from a darkened room into the blaze of noon;—for an instant only. Then, as Laurence came forward, polite, unexpectant, head and heart recovered their natural serenity and poise. She coupled her minute's perturbation with the afternoon's fainting fit as mere weakness of the flesh; and so slipped all unconsciously past a danger-point that must have wrecked a woman less pure-hearted, less innately controlled.

By the time he reached her, she could acknowledge frankly how good it was to see her friend again. His turn now to stand amazed, blood and pulses in commotion; surprise, welcome, ecstasy, compressed into one eloquent monosyllable: "You!"

His hand went out with the word, and drawing her from the carriage, he retained his hold a second longer than need be. "Julian never told me!" he said, vainly trying to recapture the face of his dreams in the uncertain light.

"He didn't know. I'm an after-thought! And you?"

"Also an after-thought! Very much so. They don't even know in there. Julian's gone to tell them."

"Delightful!" She smiled up at him; and the dividing months were swept away in one sweep of her lashes that gave access to the unfathomable deeps of her eyes.

"But how—? And why—Captain Laurence?"

He beamed at that. "Oh, as I had to be over in Kashmir and the Colonel couldn't get away, he sent me down to Pindi on some business of his. And while I sat raging at the usual delays, a spirit of adventure gripped me by the hair, and carried me up here! Only four or five days. But it's worth it. I arrived by this evening's mail. Even Julian knew nothing till I stepped into the bungalow and found myself in the heart of a romance. He's just beside himself, dear old chap. Insisted on bringing me over to do honour to the great occasion. Allow me—!"

He laughingly proffered his arm; and her finger-tips upon his coat sleeve set all his nerves athrill.

Monica Rivers met them at the door, and an interlude of mingled good wishes and explanations followed. Lyndsay's gaze travelled irresistibly to the far end of the room where Gwen stood with her lover. No false bashfulness, no coquetry of veiled glance or drooping head about this golden-hearted girl—woman to the core, for all her boyishness of temper and carriage. Mrs. Rivers looked also; her own pain drowned in the unfathomed deeps of mother-love.

"Have you ever seen anything quite so radiant as my Gwen?" she asked under her breath.

"Never in my life," Lyndsay averred, recalling with a strange pang her own so-different first night of betrothal, shadowed by memory of the dead, and a vague discomfortable tremor that she had mistaken for shyness. "Captain Finlay has bewitched her. She sparkles like a diamond."

"A poet's tribute! Come and tell her so yourself."

But at this point Mr. Rivers appeared; and Gwen, deserting her lover, flew to him and slipped a hand under his arm.

"*I'm* going to take in Father even if the honour does belong to Lyn," she announced, pressing close to him, her radiance softened to an infinite tenderness. "I'm the *Burra Mem* to-night! Beloved, you can have—Julian; your old flame! And the two 'after-thoughts'"—

her quick ear had caught the phrase—"can take in each other. Quite like old times!" She tripped them a curtsey for greeting. "I'm sure you'll both bless me if I take your congratulations for granted. Captain Laurence can treasure up his pretty speeches till it's time to drink—our health."

With the lightly stressed pronoun she flung a glance at her lover that disabled him for conversational purposes, and so swept from the room—a gracious vision of youth triumphant, with all the world at her feet.

Women who think and feel—no matter how happy their own venture—find always an under-note of pathos in the high-hearted assurance with which the untried vessel slips from the haven of girlhood out on to the untravelled seas of marriage. But, in this case, Lyndsay and Monica Rivers felt doubt of the future incompatible with knowledge of the man. To both, as they watched Gwen pass between the curtains on her father's arm, came the identical thought that whatever the future might hold for her of pain and stress, in one sense at least—and that the highest—it would be well with the child.

Her own buoyant conviction of the fact roused the whole table to unconscious response, for all the deep and diverse heart-stirrings that surged like the groundswell of ocean beneath a surface of foam and spray. And if elemental emotions rendered the three men more or less tongue-tied, the women, true to their training, kept the conversational cockle-shell as airily afloat as though groundswells were undreamed of in their philosophy. Once only, across the gleam of glass and silver, the soft profusion of roses, yellow and white, the prisoned spirits of those whose voyage neared its ending met and mingled in a community of tragic thought, too intimate for speech, too harrowing for tears. For the rest, the man, who had heard (his "work untrimmed, the sunset gun too soon"), resolutely concentrated his mind upon the child whose happiness outlined in silver the cloud that obscured his heaven of blue.

As for Laurence, his perturbed heart—balanced between his own tragedy and his friend's fulfilment—put a natural check upon his gift of speech. For in this sudden renewal of nearness he discovered how the love destined to last,

the love that includes passion, while transcending it, is in no way lessened by absence; but born again, rather, with renewed intensity and depth. It was all he could do to keep his eyes from one face; his brain from losing the drift of talk in musings upon what he read there. Changed he found her in many respects; yet more than ever love-worthy. He missed the delicate bloom of health in her cheeks, the sparkle of light and fire under her surface stillness. In their stead, quickened perception divined a limitless patience, a tranquillity wrested from struggle. She had suffered. He was sure of it. Probably suffered still. Yet, through it all, her beauty had retained its moonlight quality; the luminous serenity, that had charmed him from the first; and, in spite of changes that troubled him, he recognised, with a thrill, the old entrancing tricks of tone and manner; the unforgettable curves of her lips; the faint lift of the brows; the waves of thought and sympathy that rippled over her face, like cloud-shadows on a day of light wind.

She had much to ask of Gilgit, of the campaign. "And I may congratulate you, in person—mayn't I?—on the V. C.? I had a fuller account of it from Captain Finlay than from you."

"Well—naturally—" The blood burned through his tan. "It was great luck getting the chance. All the same—" he paused, adding under cover of Gwen's animation: "I'd sooner have Julian's luck to-night; even if I had to pay for it with my right arm."

"Ah, but you'll have that as well—one of these days, without such payment."

"Shall I? It's none too common."

"Marriage?"

"No.—Winning the one woman."

He spoke very low, but his tone was matter-of-fact; and he appeared mainly absorbed in pursuing a mercurial atom of jelly with his fork. Only the presence of others and the prosaic accessories of a meal gave him courage to gratify his insane desire to hear her solution of a problem he might one day be called upon to solve.

"You think marriage essential?" he asked, triumphantly capturing the fugitive.

"To happiness?"

"No. To general development."

"Almost. You see—it completes a human being as nothing else can. But still—" It was her turn to pause.

"You would not blame a man who failed—of Julian's luck, and yet—married in the end?"

"No—no. Only—one would be sorry—"

"For the woman?"

"For both. Of course one knows that if only ideal marriages came off, the race would soon be at an end. Yet I think—"

Another pause. She saw his casual-seeming curiosity now as an indirect confidence; saw that he wanted her honest opinion; hard to give without implication of her own tragedy. Her hesitation showed him that she understood; and a man desperately in love has a fatal propensity for skirting precipices.

"I want very much to know what you think," he said without looking up.

"That is just why I can't speak at random. But marriage, even at its best, is so full of difficulties, that on the whole it seems unwise—to run risks. Still—it's a complicated question; and we are each bound to settle it for ourselves. Another's opinion must not impel you—to a life of loneliness."

Then at last he turned his eyes upon her, deliberately veiling their fire. The blush he had evoked under the *sirus* would never be forgotten; and, remembering it, he had need to see if she could mention his marriage with complete equanimity of feature, as of tone. She met his direct look with a troubled crease between the brows; then her eyes softened to a smile. In the emotion of the moment he failed to realize how inability to conceive the lightest allusion to herself shielded her from all suspicion of the truth. She accepted his hint at fruitless devotion to another, as crowning proof of friendship; her sole approach to danger lying in a vague wonder how any woman beloved by such a man could fail to respond.

But before either could speak, Mrs. Rivers—who had been subconsciously aware of them throughout an argument involving all four—claimed Alan's attention and held it till he was called upon to propose the health of "the bride"; the which he did in words few and simple

enough, yet so moving, so spontaneous that the outlines of his face grew blurred to Finlay's eyes, and Mrs. Rivers grasped his arm cordially when he sat down.

Gwen smiled candidly on him as he held the door for them to pass out; and in the drawing-room flung both arms round her mother, pressing a flushed cheek against her own.

"Beloved,—he's a darling!"

"I discovered that first!"

"No. Not my one. Julian's 'Larry.' No wonder he loves him.—Now I shall leave you and Lyn to talk sedate married nothings! I'm in a mood for trees and the moon."

"So is someone else I suspect."

Her flush deepened. "What a discerning Mum!"

"My child, I was once twenty-two—and slender; though it's hard to believe! Now run along. I have a very important nothing to discuss with Lyndsay before the men come in."

"Have you—truly?" Lyndsay asked, as the white figure slipped out among the shadows; and Mrs. Rivers drew her down into the depths of the couch.

"Truly and faithfully, as Gwen used to say."

"But what?"

"Just an inspired variant of my old prescription!" Then, as the white forehead crumpled in a pleading frown, she made haste to add: "Seriously darling it's a heaven-sent plan; and I can't let you refuse without considering it in full. I know your Jim has a holy horror of the average hill-station and the grass widow combined. But—Kashmir would be another thing altogether."

"Kashmir!" Lyndsay breathed between ecstasy and despair. It was a word to conjure with, as Monica Rivers knew right well; a word to shatter the stoutest fortifications of resolve. At the sound of it apathy trembled into longing, as grey mists of morning tremble into irradiant films at the kiss of the sun. And Monica Rivers followed up her master-stroke with eloquent word-pictures of lake and mountain, pine forest and *mergs** enamelled with wild flowers; till a faint colour crept into Lyndsay's cheeks.

"Oh, I know—I know," she murmured, vainly trying

*Meadows.

to shut out the vision delectable that drew her like a magnet. "Captain Laurence wrote of it. I have photos. But—even if Jim consented—how—?"

"Did he never write of Mrs. Lenox? She lives at Gulmerg; above Srinagar."

"Oh, yes. She must be charming." Fresh temptation here. Her tone implied it. "But then—I'm a stranger—"

"That counts for very little in India. Besides—I'm not. Quita will gladly do me a favour, which would be its own reward. And if she is free to have you, the sooner the better. I could send her a three-volume wire to-morrow, reply prepaid—"

"Oh dear—dearest—you're going much too fast, Nothing's decided yet."

"Isn't it, my sweet little Stoic? Well, it soon will be!" She pressed the small figure closer and her voice deepened. "Darling child, I can't let you think me a ghoul in petticoats, whose main mission in life is to separate husbands and wives! I do believe in standing by the man through thick and thin."

"Only—not in my case?"

"No. In every case, except where there is brutality, or drunkenness, or horrors of that kind. Still—in your case there are serious complications that drive me to seem an apostle of selfishness. May I speak plainly, dear, as if you were my very daughter?"

The folds of grey gauze over Lyndsay's breast betrayed her quickened breathing.

"What sort of plainly?" she asked, twisting Videlle's fire-veined opal slowly round and round. "I love you with all my heart; still—you know, I can't discuss—Jim with anyone."

"I ought to know it by now! And it's a pity more wives don't share your disability. All I want you to realize is that I have watched with the insight and anxiety of love the changes and chances of the whole situation. I know without need of a word from you that the last six months have been one long nerve strain for you both; and now Carrie's tragedy has brought matters to a crisis that threatens to wreck the whole ship. You are not of the jumpy hysterical kind; but I can see how underneath

your stoicism your nerves are wearing threadbare. You cry too readily; you don't sleep well; and you fainted this afternoon. With your husband's temperament nerve strain spells causeless irritability, which will become a confirmed habit in no time, and be as great a misery to himself as to you. There dear, you see there is no need for discussion. In twenty-seven years of marriage I've learnt a little about human nature. You have the most fatal of all figures to contend with—the triangle! And as things stand the one chance for you both is a snapped thread and a fresh start."

"Yes. I have thought that too."

"Wise child! There's nothing like it when difficulties twist themselves into a knot. For nearly all of us life is a series of beginnings; and those come through it best who have courage and energy enough to make the most of them. 'To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall; And, baffled, get up and begin again.' It's a dusty form of heroism; But at least it's within reach of us all. He can join you in August; and I'm sure Quita would keep Baby while you two go off together somewhere for a second honeymoon. We've had three or four since we married; and the later ones strike a fuller chord of happiness than the first. You, of course, need say nothing of all this. Your own health and the child's are sufficient excuse for the move. I am bothered about her, Lyndsay. She doesn't thrive as she ought."

"No. Jim sees that, I think."

"Well, have I convinced you that my prescription is as much for her good and his as for your own? And will you trust me to speak to him to-morrow?"

"Yes. If he quite sees it's essential—for Baby, I'll go."

"And you don't really think me a ghoul—in your Puritan heart?"

"Dearest!"

Love and reproach were in the low cry that demolished all barriers of constraint. Soft cool arms went round the older woman's neck; and the too ready tears were moist upon her cheek.

"Child, child," she said tenderly, kissing the silken ripple of hair. "Things must straighten out—in time.

Perhaps Carrie may propose to some one in Mussoorie! As for me, if I have seemed to press you about the hills, it is because I can hardly bear the thought of going Home and leaving you to wear through the hot weather alone."

"You—going home—!" The soft arms clung closer.

"Yes, darling—for good. It has come to that."

Then in words resolutely simple and controlled she laid bear her own heart more fully than she ever was like to do again; violating her strong instinct of reserve in the hope that the deeper dark of irremediable tragedy might by contrast lighten the grey aspect of Lyndsay's life.

Their murmured colloquy was only broken by the approaching sound of two voices; the owner of the third having succumbed to the lure of "trees and the moon."

"Play and sing to him, Lyndsay," Mrs. Rivers urged as they drew apart. "He loves your voice. It would soothe him more than anything."

No other household in Peshawur suspected Lyndsay's natural gift of song. But here she could sing without shyness, unchilled by criticism—knowing the music loved for its own sake. So she spent the evening at the piano, singing the simplest folk songs—English, German, Scotch—that had been Vereker's delight when he returned wearied out with the day's round.

Thus Laurence had no further speech of her till he escorted her to the victoria and bade her good-night.

"I'm off again in four days," he said, as their hands met. "Ride with me to-morrow or next day—please."

"Next day—perhaps. I've done so little these last months."

"We can take it leisurely. It might do you good."

"I know it would; but—if it's possible, I'll write and let you know."

"Thanks ever so much. You don't look as strong as you did. Shall you go to the Hills?"

"I may—on Baby's account. Possibly Gulmerg."

"Gulmerg!" His whole face lit up. "That's good hearing. You'll meet Mrs. Lenox, and—"

"Oh don't talk of it yet!" she begged, half laughing. "Nothing's fixed. It's a castle in the air. Good-night."

But all the way home, she lay back with closed eyes, troubles and tangles forgotten, dreaming of Kashmir.

The house was dark and still; one lamp left for her in the drawing-room. A long line of light showed the study door ajar; and creeping noiselessly in, she was confronted by a vision of her husband asleep in his chair; head fallen a little sideways; mouth half open; tantalus and tumbler at his elbow; a book on his knees. For many minutes she stood watching him—a small grey ghost, with fingers interlocked and lips that strove for steadiness; while pain, tenderness, hope, and dread made discordant music in her heart.

Then she stole away without waking him; and so to bed, where the doubts and miseries of her private shadow-land were dispelled by thoughts of her eventful evening;—of Monica Rivers' tragedy, Gwen's happiness, and her own frank pleasure in meeting Laurence again. As aforetime, she could not but be aware of his exhilarating effect upon her. The man was as wholesome and refreshing as a breeze from his own mountains. She recalled, with a smile, her old simile about looking towards the sunrise; and fell asleep wondering vaguely who and where was the unresponsive unknown whom he had loved and failed to win.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

I would hide my sorrow among the Hills
Listen, listen—the Hills are calling me.
—W. B. YEATS.

THE clouds that darkened Videlle's brow on hearing that Laurence was in Peshawur made Lyndsay fear that the Kashmir project was doomed in advance; the more so when her first mention of it evoked the intolerable comment that he supposed her 'Sapper friend' was responsible for the idea. Whereat she shrank into her shell and answered coldly: "If you are going to take that tone the matter can drop; and I'll let Mrs. Rivers know. It was her plan entirely. She has suggested the Hills more than once, and I said not—for several reasons. Only she seems to think Kashmir would be different to an ordinary station."

He nodded; still frowning.

"Yes; it would. Though of course *I* don't know this Mrs. Lenox."

"She does—well. But why discuss details? We're not going; and there's an end of it."

"Is there? I suppose *I* have some voice in the matter? I've been thinking of it myself."

Pure perversity had prompted his change of front; but he was quick to detect the virtue of a half truth whereby he might acquire merit in her eyes, and eclipse Monica Rivers' zeal for her welfare by his own.

"Jim! Have you really?"

"Yes. Amazing, isn't it?" But he had heard the music of approval in her tone; and catching her by the wrist scrutinized her sharply. "D'you want to go, Lyn?"

"Only if it would be best—for Baby."

"Not on your own account? You've been run down ever since that nursing."

"Nothing to trouble about. I could quite well pull

along till August; and I don't at all like leaving you;—especially with Carrie in this state."

The sun-ray of her honesty dispelled the cloud. His fingers tightened on her wrist. "You sweet little soul! I believe you mean it."

"Yes, Jim. I do."

"All the same you're better away, both of you. What with teething and fever the child doesn't give you half a chance; and if you were to get knocked up it would be a bad business for her—and me. As for Carrie, I'm used to her. You're not. I should join the P. I. Mess, and be very little in the bungalow; and she won't take things so hard once you and Baby are off the scenes. Yes—it's advisable all round; and Kashmir's the best possible place."

For reward he had her lips upon his cheek; light, cool yet lingering ever so little; and, the moment being propitious, she ventured further.

"Dear, Captain Laurence asked me to ride with him to-morrow. I should enjoy it—if you don't mind. Besides, it would seem ungracious to refuse."

He shrugged. "Yes—I suppose you can't exactly be rude to the fellow. But I'm glad he's not here for long. You're the reverse—eh?"

His hand tilted her chin, and she met his gaze with unshadowed eyes.

"Isn't any further harping on that subject just a little—degrading, for us both?" she asked, and there was no ignoring the gentle finality of her tone. The devils that were his familiars slunk off with inverted tails. "I only mentioned the ride because I don't make engagements without reference to you."

He laughed uneasily, to cloak discomfiture.

"Such a dutiful little martyr! But she sha'n't be burnt at the stake to prove her allegiance. Your precious Mrs. Rivers is not the only person on earth who is concerned for your welfare; though no doubt she thinks as much!"

Thus Monica Rivers, driving round in full anticipation of encountering thorns and briars, among which she must walk warily, found a made road smooth beneath her feet; smooth even to slipperiness, since she could not bring herself to credit the man's implied assurance that—save

for the detail of place—her plan merely echoed his own decision. This, however, she did not allow him to guess; and if their amenities masked a certain amount of overt fencing, the outcome was all that could be wished. The "three-volume wire" sped through space to Gulmerg; Hut No. 23—there was fascination in the mere address; and evening brought Quita's answer: "Delighted. As soon as you please. Writing to Mrs. Videlle."

Thus, when Laurence called next day to claim her for his ride, he found her castle in the clouds translated into a log cabin under Himalayan pines.

"Less high-sounding; but very much more to the point!" she added, smiling, and loyally stifling the anticipation that glowed like a lamp behind her eyes.

"The race-course?" he asked as they turned out of the gate. "If you're up to a canter?" And she nodded; swift motion through the air best matched the subdued flutter within, as of wings, outspread, quivering, poised for flight.

But a single round of the course left her flushed and breathless, clearly unfit for more; and Laurence, watching her, frowned distressfully, thinking of an earlier day. "Just shows how badly you need the change," said he on a note of solicitude. "I ought not to have suggested it. We'll go slow now—and talk."

So they rode on at leisure through the warm dust-filled haze of that May evening, that held its own distinctive enchantment for both; till the sun set foot upon the Frontier hills, changing their noontide greens and greys to richer harmonies of umber, indigo, and rose. And all the while his talk was of Gulmerg—aptly named the "meadow of flowers"; of Hut No. 23 and the charming hostess awaiting her there.

"I'm downright fond of Mrs. Lenox," he declared frankly. "And I think she'll be specially glad to have you just now. It must be a bitter disappointment to her not getting back to Gilgit this summer; though I'm sure the Colonel's right. Not that any of the tribes would care to attack us after Nilt. But there's an undercurrent of ferment all over the country, and the Colonel himself hasn't been able to get away since the campaign."

"It must be cruelly hard for her.—Are there children?"

"Yes. Mere babies; and I believe she's just taken charge of the two little Desmonds as well. Quite a nursery!"

"Oh—I'm glad of that."

The fervour in her low tone did not escape him.

"Are you so fond of children?" he asked scanning the hills.

"I love them—beyond everything."

"You're in luck then."

"Yes, indeed!—if it wasn't for my husband having to stay down in the heat."

He nodded. "Hard lines, of course. But we men learn to accept that as part and parcel of Indian Service. When d'you start?"

The question of questions was broached with admirable unconcern.

"Next Monday I think. Though I don't seem to believe it yet."

"By yourself?"

"Yes, Jim can't get away. He will take us to Pindi, and see us off in the tonga. Then I shall have the ayah; and his old bearer, who is devoted to me, will go to Gulmerg with us and come back."

"And you won't mind travelling alone with natives for several days?"

"I'm not sure—about that. But it's high time I conquered such foolishness."

He was silent, raging inwardly at the thought that his very love for her curbed the natural promptings of chivalry. His own date was Saturday; and had she been another woman, or he another man, he would have delayed departure and proffered his escort as a matter of course. Instead, he could but say regretfully, "Wish I were not going up so soon. But I may still be in Srinagar when you pass through. You'll probably sleep there Friday; and if I'm not obliged to hurry on, I'll look in at the *dák* bungalow that night and see you safely off to Gulmerg next morning."

"Oh, that would be lovely! How good of you!"

"Most remarkably good of me!" he agreed with ironical laughter. And upon that understanding they parted three days later by which time Lyndsay had her

letter from Hut No. 23; a letter of such genuine welcome as Quita well knew how to write; a letter that, in defiance of dutiful self-repression, set the hidden wings of Lyndsay's spirit fluttering afresh. "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help." It seemed to her, in that week of strangely intermingled hope and pain, that the words were written in light upon her brow; and as each day brought departure nearer, she prayed the more fervently that the strength of the hills might renew her own flagging forces of body and spirit, and so give her courage for that fresh start that should justify in full measure the desertion of a moment.

In the meantime she discovered that the near prospect of leaving Jim for two months troubled her more than she could have believed. For though he had failed to awaken in her the strong heart-to-heart love of the wife; though his vacillations, jealousies, and injustice might strain endurance almost to breaking-point; her woman's soul yearned over him with a mother's tenderness; and had she guessed at the contents of his private cupboard, or seen the totals of his monthly bill from a certain bazaar wine-merchant, it is doubtful whether she could have brought herself to leave him even for the sake of her child.

Great women are so made; and such greatness in the garb of gentleness—though it may fail of individual effect—ranks among the main uplifting levers of the world. Such natures also—though they endure unmerited suffering—look out upon "a wide horizon which, here and again, takes in the joys that only the loftiest know; even as the horizon of earth, though not seen from a mountain peak, would appear at times to be one with the cornerstone of heaven."

And apart from all thought of her husband, Lyndsay's heart failed her at the prospect of indefinite separation from the dear woman who had so loved and so intimately understood her from the first. Peshawur bereft of her inspiriting personality would seem empty indeed. Gwen was to go home with her parents in June; and Finlay, following on three months' leave, would bring her out in the autumn as his bride. To have Gwen there would be much; but the girl could never fill the mother's place in Lyndsay's life.

And what of Carrie—a misery now to herself as well as to others? Not all her relief at getting rid of the child could check her covert thrusts at "these new-fangled wives who bolt the minute they begin to get a little uncomfortable." The fact that she herself had no desire to go set her on a pedestal of her own making, from which convenient eminence she showered scorn upon the new-fangled wife, whenever Videlle was safely out of earshot. From him Lyndsay had half expected vacillation after his first decision. But on this point the Doctor controlled the man. He was more anxious about the child than he allowed her to guess. Daughter or no, she was his own; the one living link between him and the sweetest woman on earth.

So he kept his inevitable waverings to himself—until the last afternoon.

All the morning Lyndsay and Mrs. Rivers had been busy with the hundred and one details necessary for travelling with a sick child; and the subsequent parting had been a cruel moment for both; not to be won through without tears.

"Partings and meetings make up half the sum of Indian life," Mrs. Rivers had said, striving after the cold comfort of philosophy. "You'll have your fill of them, darling, before you're through."

"Yes—but in our case—what hope of meeting?" Lyndsay murmured brokenly and was folded close.

"Some day—some day, my child. And at least, thank God, I've had the good fortune to be near you when you needed me most."

So one wrench was over; but another was yet to come.

After lunch, as Videlle sat at his table, making believe to write letters, his wife came and stood by him.

"What is it, Lyn?" he asked looking up, an insane hope knocking at his heart.

"Luggage labels!" she answered, smiling mistily; and his hand closed upon hers.

"You don't find it easy to go, after all, eh?"

"I never thought it would be easy."

"Ah—!" His grip tightened on the admission, and the barriers of control went down before it like a house of cards. "If *you* find it difficult—what must it be for me?

Lyndsay, you adorable woman, I can't bear to lose sight of you! Anything might happen. I might—I might never see you again."

"Dear, would such a calamity break your heart?" she asked with tender deliberate lightness far removed from flippancy; and the smothered passion of his reply startled her.

"I should blow out my brains."

"Jim—Jim!" Her free hand went round his shoulders as if to protect him from himself, and her head rested against his own. "That's exaggeration. You know it is. But still—if you really feel like that about it—I'll stay."

"Good Heavens, Lyndsay! D'you *mean* that?"

He swung his revolving chair round upon its swivel, and catching her by both arms searched her face with eyes that seemed to pierce through flesh and blood to her very soul.

She met the ordeal without wavering; only her lower lip was compressed a moment before she answered steadily, "Of course I mean it."

But he must needs prove her further yet.

"Isn't it too late to change round? How about all your arrangements—and Mrs. Lenox?"

"We could wire at once, and have the heavy luggage sent back. It would cost less than sending us after it!"

And she achieved a smile.

"But what on earth would Mrs. Rivers say?"

"I don't know. After all, it's our own affair."

"And—the child?"

That word brought a pucker of pain to her brow. "Surely, dear, it's for you to decide how far we dare run risks. I can only spend myself to the utmost—for you both."

At that, with a low cry he caught her to him; and she, half believing her sacrifice accepted, yet racked with the pain of uncertainty, almost felt consciousness slip away from her. Only the ingrained habit of self-control saved her from a catastrophe that would have wrecked all. As to Videlle—for once he believed her utterly, implicitly; and in the glow of that belief, for once had strength to rise above himself, and to play the man.

"My darling, you are true woman through and through,"

he told her when the perfect moment was past. "But it's enough for me to know that you would throw it all up even now, if I were brute enough to allow it. Besides —we must run no risks with Baby—"

In the revulsion of feeling her tension of will relaxed. He felt her weigh more heavily upon him; saw the colour ebb from her face.

"Lyn, what's wrong? Tired to death with the heat and the packing?"

"Yes; just tired. That's all."

And the next moment she lay unconscious in his arms.

For a few seconds he sat looking down upon her, anxiety merged in admiration of her twofold beauty of spirit and flesh. Wearied out with the long weeks of nursing, followed by ceaseless care and anxiety for their child; disheartened by the strain of the whole thorny situation;—yet, at a word from him, she would have stayed!

The conviction—echoing and re-echoing in his heart —upheld him through the wakeful hours of their night-long journey, and through the wrench of parting that followed; upheld him even when at last he stood alone in the sunlight watching her tonga, with its halo of dust, dwindle to a speck upon the Murree Road.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

**Is it ever wrong for a man to do right? Is it ever right to do wrong?—J. L. Allen.**

It was upon the Monday morning that Videlle watched Lyndsay's tonga melt into the landscape: and, on the Tuesday after, Laurence—who should by then have been in Kashmir territory—sat in the verandah of a Murree Hotel, contemplating broken rifts of azure through the blue-green levels of cedar boughs, and wondering how soon a certain tonga from Pindi might reasonably be expected to arrive.

Not that he had deliberately gone back on his decision; but—as often happens when a man thinks himself clear of the delectable forbidden—Things Inanimate had risen up against him, with power, deflecting his point of view. He had spent wakeful hours, on Friday night, beleagured by the imperative desire to stay and see her safely through a journey sufficiently adventurous for a woman new to the country and hampered by a sick child. But the drumming of his pulses, at thought of three or four days alone with her, warned him that though chivalry might whisper "Stay," prudence counselled honourable retreat. There was Videlle also, who might be trusted to read an ill motive into the simplest act. In the end he had obeyed the voice of conscience ruefully enough: and on Saturday morning had set his face toward the hills.

It was at this point that Things Inanimate had begun to take charge of affairs. On the principle of the man who runs toward the undesired lest he turn back, he had planned to start early and reach Murree by nightfall. But unlooked for obstructions so delayed him that he must needs sleep at the first *dák*-bungalow twenty-five miles out; and climb the steadily steepening cart-track to Murree on Sunday morning. Narrowing paths and deeper *khuds* did not affect the recklessness of his Mussul-

man driver one whit. He sped, at a hand gallop round impossible corners and down abrupt inclines, with phlegmatic disregard for the absence of railings, or for the safety of his passenger, to whom *khuds* of the lower hills were as the sides of ditches after the precipices of the Hindu Kush; though, down the sides of such ditches, a man would have small difficulty in breaking his neck or cracking his skull on an outcrop of granite.

Laurence—with Lyndsay haunting his mind—recalled the sensations of his own first tonga journey; exaggerated them, perhaps, in the stress of renewed indecision; till at length the victory, whereon he had prided himself, began to look awkwardly like the flight of a coward,—leaving a lone woman and child to fare as best they might, because, forsooth, he did not trust himself to keep the door of his lips and veil the fire of his eyes. So hard is it, in the tangle of motives, desires and arbitrary conventions, to unravel the fine-drawn niceties of the wrong that may be half right, and the right that may be half wrong; to discern the straight path through the maze and walk in it without wavering. Once again, as his ponies cast the miles behind them, the pangs of uncertainty rent him, and once again the Inanimate—Destiny, Providence, call it what you will—gave the casting vote.

They were about eight miles from Murree when the mail tonga—its warning note unheeded, or unheard—swung round a sharp corner, at full speed, and crashed into the humbler conveyer of passengers; the driver's yell of execration returned with interest by Laurence's charioteer. For one desperate moment the carts were locked; the ponies plunging madly; the men maligning each other's ancestors with Oriental fluency of invention. Vic, thoroughly enjoying the joke, added her shrill quota to the babel and Laurence sat wondering coolly how much longer his last moment would be deferred. Then—no one quite knew how—the mail tonga shook off the enemy and charged triumphantly ahead; while Laurence's ponies seemed to be tying themselves into a knot, and the off wheel, quietly deserting its post, trundled down to the valley intent upon its own adventures.

Laurence and Vic, jerked violently out of the back seat. might have been in danger of following suit had they

been less inured to the humours of hill travelling. As it was, Vic, grinning broadly, alighted on her fairy paws; and Laurence escaped with a few bruises and a wrenched arm, the pain of which added force to his denunciation of the driver, who called Allah to witness that the horn had not been duly sounded, and vowed he would have the victor's blood. Surely the Presence could not blame a humble servant of the Sirkar for that which was written? If he would mercifully walk up to Murree, coolies should be found for the smaller packages, and a fresh tonga be sent to Pindi without delay. Or maybe there was one leaving on the morrow in which his Excellency might find a seat.

This last smote Laurence to silence; and while he stood frowning, motionless, the armies engaged within him swept back and forward as before. But now his accident italicised the dangers of the road. Thought of Lyndsay and the child, that was her light of life, at the mercy of a Jehu like his own turned him cold; and much tonga travelling had taught him that a cautious driver is something less common than a white crow. Thus, when the man looked up wondering at the Sahib who spoke not, his decision, right or wrong, was made past altering.

"Yes; I know of a tonga leaving Pindi to-morrow. I will wait at Murree," he had said, cloaking the inner tumult with studied calm: and to-day he sat awaiting that tonga, blessing the mishap which had saved him, in spite of himself, from flinging away this one divine opportunity of helping her in the only way Fate and their relation would allow. As for the danger he had fled from, —the danger of betraying himself—in his more exalted view the fear of it seemed profanity. Deepening knowledge of the woman assured him that nothing short of the three fatal words would enlighten her; and of these he firmly believed himself incapable.

The far-off flourish of a horn brought him to his feet, doubts and heart-searchings forgotten, in sheer joy of anticipation. Ten minutes—fifteen minutes, and he would see her; not for a paltry hour or so but for continuous days and hours, wherein it would be his privilege to serve her as he might never be permitted to do again. Happily the Hotel verandah was empty; and by way of

a sobering effect he paced the boards, till the tonga clattered up with Lyndsay in the back seat, one hand clinging to the iron-work, the other clasping her child. Then he cleared the steps at a bound, and presented himself to her astonished gaze.

"Not so far ahead after all, you see! May I help you out?"

"Captain Laurence! I thought you were miles away!"

The surprise and welcome in her voice dispelled the result of his pacings forthwith; but his first sight of the child—momentarily forgotten—brought him down from the empyrean. Once or twice he had wondered about it. Now he saw. The opaque brown eyes, arched and fringed with jet, the dull, unmistakable tint of the tiny face, contrasted painfully with the transparency of Lyndsay's pallor, the clear violet grey of her eyes.

In the meantime he had landed them safely on the steps; and Lyndsay noticing his glance smiled down upon her treasure. "You've not seen her before?" she said softly.

"No."

With all the will in the world he could not add more; and the constraint in his voice brought a fleeting colour to her cheek. The process of putting it all behind her was even now far from complete; and she was too well aware of this man's attitude of mind. Crushing the child against her breast, she kissed it tenderly. "I must go and see about milk," she said without looking up; and at prospect of losing her, power of speech returned.

"But you'll come back and have some tea? I'm sure your throat's full of dust."

"It is! And my head with noise. It's a barbarous method of travelling. Tea in the verandah would be refreshing. Then you shall tell me how you come to be here."

He told her later, at some length, while they drank tea together in a shadowed corner of the verandah.

"And you go on to-morrow?" she asked. The implied "I hope" emboldened him further.

"Yes. I waited on the chance that you night be kind enough to spare me the front seat in your tonga, and send your bearer in the *ekka* with mine. The *khuds* are pretty bad farther on, and these drivers are direct descendants

of the son of Nimshi. But with me at his elbow your man would have to change his tune! And I could take all the bothers of the journey off your hands—if I may!"

Her eyes had long since given him his answer, though her lips still demurred. "I'm afraid it would delay you. We have orders to take it very quietly—four days."

"I can write to the Colonel. He'll quite understand."

"But there may be more bothers than you think for,—travelling with a sick child. You wouldn't mind—really?"

"Mind! It would be a privilege."

At that her smile shone out. "Well—if you will twist it so charmingly! I can only say 'thank you' with all my heart. Don't utterly despise me—but all yesterday and to-day I felt so tired and worried over Baby, so like an atom of dust astray in the universe, that I half thought of resting here a week, and then going back! Rank cowardice?"

"No. Overstrained nerves. But now—?"

"Of course not! It was just a temptation. Still—it *is* a rest to feel one can rely absolutely—on you."

"Absolutely," he answered looking her very straight in the eyes. Then, noting how her lids drooped, he added: "Look here, you're dead beat. Why not turn in now, and I'll have dinner sent up to you, later on."

"Yes. I would like that. And to-morrow, we start—?

"Whenever you're ready. Don't trouble about details. Leave everything to me."

"May I? What luxury! Good-night then—and thank you again."

His large enclosing grasp gave her a sense of protection strangely pleasant and strangely new. In this Fate-sent friend, whose help she accepted without afterthought or scruple, she recognised more and more that innately dominant male spirit, which rules not woman only, but the world. It was this quality that she so missed in her husband; though her determination to avoid even mental criticism half blinded her to the fact.

Her first sensation on waking was of rest unspeakable. Whatever might befall now, strong safe hands and a practical head were at her service; leaving her free to concentrate heart and thought upon the jewel that

seemed to be slipping out of her grasp. But the dry skin was moister this morning, the swollen gums less inflamed; the small sweet face a shade less fragile-looking; trifles of vast import to the anxious eyes of love. Altogether this new world of mountains and far-off flashing snows, whose breath was the breath of life, seemed to Lyndsay a place of rare enchantment, while they sped, at a rate less nerve shattering than before, through stretches of fragrant fir and deodar, past banks starred with wild strawberry and clematis, down and down, by winding degrees into the great Jhelum valley. At first sight the river gleamed far below them, a ribbon of foam; but by noon they were across it, clattering over the suspension bridge that unites India to Kashmir; and not long after drew up at a roadside chalet for food and rest . Little of the last for Lyndsay. Heat and jolting had again upset little Monica. Her lamentations were pitiful to hear, and Lyndsay spent the brief halt mainly in ministering to her needs; while Laurence, smoking in the verandah, gauged dimly—very dimly——what it may mean to be responsible for carrying on the race.

When the tonga reappeared, he asked leave to usurp Miriam's seat for the remaining twenty miles to Dulai.

"There are some rather nasty drops," he explained, "and in case of the ponies jibbing, or any little accident, I should feel handier to you and the child."

"Oh, at this rate you'll spoil me altogether!" she declared half laughing. But her soft eyes thanked him for his thoughtfulness, and he had his way; arranging skilfully two pillows, so that she might rest her back without being unduly jarred by the motion of the cart.

They fared now along the precipitous bank of the Jhelum, its hoarse shout mingling with the chorus of hoofs, tonga-bar and horn; the road running at times over wooden galleries carried, Gilgit-wise, across sheer cliffs; at times under tunnels bored through buttresses of rock; a marvel of mountain engineering. High above them the steep, terraced hill-sides were vivid with young corn; higher still, patches of forest blotched the grazing grounds of mountain cattle; and through gaps in the lower ranges gleamed the blue-white of Himalayan snows.

They talked fitfully, through the clamour of their going; and in the intervals Lyndsay crooned and murmured, mother-fashion, to the small sun-bonnetted creature on her knee, till it fell into a light doze, enabling her to lean back for a few moments with closed eyes. Laurence sat watching them both in a strangely exalted contentment, pierced with pain at thought of that which might have been,—which ought to have been, he reiterated fiercely again and again.

They were nearing a village now, speeding along a welcome stretch of level, when a violent lurch of the cart, followed by anguished yells, told Laurence that an unwary pariah had been caught napping, and almost flung Lyndsay out of her seat. Unconsciously her grasp of the child had loosened; and, in the moment's confusion, little Monica must have been jerked into the road, had not Laurence leaned sharply forward, one hand barring the way, the other clutching at her skirt. With a broken cry Lyndsay caught and clasped her close, hushing her frightened sobs. The pariah limped off, protesting dolefully; and above the crumpled mass of muslin on Lyndsay's breast the eyes of the man and woman met.

Twice she tried to speak and could not for the tremor of her lips.

"Don't—please don't!" he commanded gently. "I quite understand; and I thank God I came."

"Yes—yes." The words were an indrawn breath; and Laurence, lifted momentarily out of the husk of self, found his truest reward in the fervent caresses bestowed upon her child. The irony of the whole incident did not come home to him till later.

Then she leaned back, white and shaken; letting her lids fall, not so much in weariness, as in a supreme effort to regain self-control. Laurence saw how her arms, straining the child to her, trembled; and after a few seconds of painful indecision his good angel triumphed. He put out a hand and touched her.

"Forgive me—but you are tired and upset. I wonder —would you let me hold her for a little? Or would you rather—the ayah—?"

"No. Not Miriam. It's too dusty in front. Be-

sides—I daren't let her out of my sight—just now. And you—?"

"Can't you trust me? You said you did—long ago. D'you remember?"

"Yes. I did—and do."

"Give me practical proof, then!"

"Oh, but she's bad with strangers. She may be troublesome—or cry—"

"I think not. I'm fond of small things, and they generally know it. Let her decide!" He advanced a finger, which was captured and turned instantly to practical account. "There now! We're quite good friends. May I try?"

At that she yielded, and the soft, warm bundle of muslin was cautiously placed in his arms.

"But it's much too good of you, really!" Lyndsay objected, smiling at his grave concentration on an ordeal that demanded a higher form of heroism than facing the bullets at Nilt. "I warned you there might be bothers you did not think for; but I never dreamed of treating you like this!"

"You're not treating me. I'm treating myself!" he replied stoutly, presenting his watch for inspection, and feeling ludicrously helpless at his inability to make the speechless imperious being understand that it was not edible. "Do lie back and rest a bit. She's quite safe; and if she gets bored with me she won't hesitate to let you know!"

In a luxury of relief Lyndsay obeyed: and, by way of verifying her implicit trust in him, kept her eyes shut for five whole minutes. She would have sworn to fifteen! Then she must needs open them to reassure herself and see how Laurence fared.

The waxen tendrils were round his watch-chain now; the sun-bonnet nestled confidingly against his coat; while he circled, with one cautious finger, the rounded curves of cheek and chin. Vic, suspicious of the unknown usurper, had emerged from under the seat, and with one featherweight paw and industrious pink tongue hinted at her own existence, without notable result. A sight to stir and capture any mother's heart: and to Lyndsay came the not unnatural conviction that here, surely, she had found

the white flower of friendship—reputed impossible between man and woman.

How should she dream that this man—seemingly forgetful of her presence—was proving the height and depth of his love for her as few would have done. Her thoughts, coloured by his supposed confidence on their night of meeting, took quite the wrong turning; in this case, safer than the right one. She saw him debarred from marriage by unrequited passion on the one hand, and honourable scruples on the other; yet finding, in her comradeship, a partial satisfaction of his need for the woman element in life. His awkward tenderness with another man's child pricked her to passing anger against the impervious unknown; and in a fervour of gratitude, tinged with deeper emotion, she rejoiced that power was hers to reward him, however inadequately, for his ungrudging services to herself and the child.

She closed her eyes again without disturbing him; and half an hour later sat up to reclaim her property. But the creature finding itself comfortably housed, had dropped into a light sleep; and Laurence, absurdly proud of his achievement, insisted on keeping her till Dulai was reached.

Here his sense of living in a dream was shattered by the presence of two superfluous subalterns in search of sport. These he damned privately, because he must needs dine and smoke with them, while Lyndsay spent the evening in her room. The subalterns voted him "poor company"; and for himself, his resentment at losing a few priceless hours showed him too plainly the danger underlying this enchantment of isolation; the urgent need for restraint if he were to win through his self-imposed ordeal unscathed. Scanning mentally the events of the day, he recognised with a thrill how confidently she leaned upon his man's strength; recognised also how this very leaning served to keep him erect.

And while he lay awake at grips with the strongest force on earth, she, poor soul, spent most of the night pacing the matting with a fevered, anguished Monica in her arms; and cold fear at her heart lest departure had been too long delayed after all. For the past four days the child had slept only in snatches and constantly re-

fused her food. It seemed as though pain and fever were relentlessly draining the life out of her tiny body. Towards dawn sheer weariness brought sleep; and Lyndsay appeared at the breakfast table, white, but smiling. It seemed unfair to burden Laurence with her private miseries; but love, that has a thousand eyes, is not readily deceived. The subalterns had started at dawn, intent on reaching Srinagar that night, and they were alone again in their enchanted mountain world.

"I can see you've had a bad night of it," he said; and her repression melted at the trouble in his tone.

"Yes. Her gum is terribly inflamed. I think—if Jim were here, he would lance it. But now—I suppose she must take her chance."

"Do you think—is she fit to go on to Domel? It's a short stage; and then—if things look bad, we could wire to Srinagar. I know a good little chap there, who'd gallop out like a shot."

She smiled at his eagerness to cheer her. "How reassuring you practical people are! Delay would do no good. We'll see how she is to-morrow."

"I might try my hand at getting her off again!" he cried, overjoyed at having chased the shadow from her eyes. "You sit there while I get our traps together and hustle up the driver. I've pretty well put the fear of God into him by now!"

She obeyed nothing loth; watching him as he passed down the verandah, and noting the lines of power and elasticity in his tall figure with soft approval in her gaze.

A three hours' drive brought them to Domel *dák*-bungalow; a picturesque chalet set on a cliff at a bend of the river, near its junction with the Kishengunga. Past the foot of the cliff the Jhelum leapt and thundered, filling the valley with sonorous music, while beyond it the greater hills, mantled with fir and pine, were stamped in heroic outline upon blue. Letters here from Peshawur and Gulmerg. Quita wrote that she had persuaded a friend to take charge of her Hut, and would ride down the thirty miles to Srinagar, so as to escort Lyndsay up the hill next morning.

"That's first class of her," was Alan's commentary on

the news. "For I couldn't go further myself, and I should have hated sending you alone."

The mere hint of proprietorship was dangerously sweet to him; and later in the afternoon, when the child had fallen asleep, and she sat writing letters in the one sitting-room, while he read and smoked in a sleeve chair, the illusion became too poignant to be endured; drove him, finally, out of the house to walk off an emotion that grew by what it fed on. Lyndsay, left alone, went on with her letter to Videlle; not an easy one to write. She had wired from Murree; and—simply as she had accepted Laurence's escort—the difficulty of making its impromptu nature clear to her husband showed her, as nothing else could have done, what leagues apart they were in spirit, and in point of view—the essence of mutual understanding. But, having determined, by unfailing frankness, to disarm his jealousy and distrust, she set down the truth without palliative or comment, save that she had found the first two days very trying, and was thankful to have nothing now to think of but the child. Then, with a fervent prayer that she might be believed, the letter was laid aside; and Laurence, returning, in a more controlled mood, persuaded her to come out with him in the cool before dinner, leaving Miriam to soothe little Monica, who grew feverish always towards evening.

For one delectable hour they strolled at leisure, between steep enclosing heights touched into transient splendour by the sun's decline; and their talk flitting easily from subject to subject rarely came home to roost. Whenever it inclined that way, Lyndsay's unobtrusive skill kept it circling about Laurence and his doings; a detail whose significance he was quick to discern. With infinite graciousness and trust she admitted him to the personal standing of friendship; but pride, no less than loyalty, drew a veil over the struggles and disappointments of the past year. By the time they reached the chalet, evening was melting into night. The perishing glow behind the western peaks throbbed with the earliest stars, and the hurrying voice of the river intensified the quiet of earth and sky. But in the verandah a more distressful sound seemed to chide Lyndsay for even temporary desertion.

"Ah, there's my poor darling in trouble again. Let them bring dinner, Captain Laurence. I won't keep you long."

For Alan the evening meal, alone with her, crowned the dreamlike sense of ownership that was upon him; and, being over, he suggested chairs in the verandah by way of luring her into a spell of intimate talk, before night robbed him of her for ten relentless hours. The situation, as a whole, could scarcely be paralleled outside India; and Lyndsay's simple, matter-of-course acceptance of it, emphasized its peculiar danger, no less than its peculiar charm. While they sat close together in the dimness, Laurence once more felt the unquenchable within him threatening the barriers of self-control. But in such emotional crises the die is cast by the soul of the woman, rather than the will of the man: and for these two there was the child also; never very far from the minds of either. Nor was it long now before their quiet ripple of talk was broken by the wearily protesting voice toward which Lyndsay flew, as always, like an arrow drawn to the head.

Laurence, left alone with his cigar, had a moment of irritability, almost of the old unreasoning anger:—a moment only. The persistence of that tired, pitiful wailing struck a shaft of pain through his heart; for behind it he was acutely aware of the dumb stoical suffering of the woman he loved.

Would it never cease—that heart-rending sound, which, if it pained him, must be torture to her? No; instead, it rose rapidly from mere protest into scream upon scream, terrible to hear.

Laurence sat forward gripping the arms of his chair; almost resolved on going in to her; when the last choking cry broke off short and sharp, like a taut string slit with a knife; and the dead weight of silence that followed was more ominous than sound.

Two seconds later old Miriam charged through the *chick*, dragging the *chuddah* from her dishevelled head; and, prompt as lightning, Laurence had her by the arm.

"In God's name, woman, what's come to the child?"

"Oh Sahib, let me go!" she moaned, struggling to free herself. "Hot water, quick! It is convulsion. My *baba-jee* will die! The Mem is terrible to see!"

"Go, then go!" He thrust her from him; and drawing a hard breath between his teeth strode back to the far end of the verandah, where he stood looking out into the night; listening, with every nerve at strain, to the interminable silence; wondering whether the divine spark had already left the small, soft body that so lately nestled against his own. He heard the old ayah return; heard movements; splashings; murmured colloquy; but no sob or gurgling cry that told of success; and he, who in unregenerate moments, had wished the child away, found himself praying wordlessly that for her sake the worst might not befall. So life, that is stronger than a single soul, leads us blindfold into strange passes. Six months earlier he would have laughed to scorn the man who had foretold him capable of agonising thus over the child of James Videlle.

To escape the futile distraction of suspense, he went back into the sitting-room, and made a pretence at finishing a letter to Lenox. But between him and the page floated visions of Lyndsay, as he had seen her in the past two days; not Lyndsay his dream divinity; but Lyndsay the priceless companion—to be served and cherished for this one little week out of eternity, as he fain would serve and cherish her all his days. Every hour of their journey together had brought home to him more piercingly the great womanliness of her; the ability to suffer in silence; almost without seeming to suffer; and dread of that which might even now have befallen her, brought a sharp constriction to his throat, such as he had known long since, when the first stirrings of manhood forbade the indignity of tears.

A sound at last. Her light step in the verandah. She was coming; and his heart stood still. For the first time he knew, in full measure, the fear that makes a coward of the bravest,—the fear of himself. For the first time he felt afraid to see her, to touch her hand. Yet, when the footsteps passed and repassed his door, a worse fear mastered him; and pushing aside his letter he sat upright, hesitating. If he went to her now, and found her in tears—? He dared not complete the thought. To admit possibility of surrender was to make the situation untenable; to shatter the enchantment at a blow.

And while he sat motionless the footsteps ceased. The scrape of a chair on the boards told him she was sitting down; and the short, stifled sound that followed drew the heart out of his body. Sheer, unconquerable need of her rose in him like the rising tide; swept him unthinking, unresisting to the door. What he meant to say or do, he knew not. She was there, close to him, and in sore trouble: that sufficed.

On his appearance she stood up, with a catch in her breath, and came to him straightway: and in that moment Alan Laurence knew, once for all, that her mere presence was his best safeguard; that she, and she alone—by virtue of her divine unconsciousness and trust in him—had power to save him from himself.

"Tell me—the worst is over?" he asked, his voice hoarse with an emotion not wholly subdued.

"Yes—yes. I was coming to you when I had conquered—my foolishness. Just reaction after the strain."

"But not foolishness," he corrected her gently. "If I felt bad, what must it have been for you?"

"It was terrible—terrible. I made sure—she had slipped away. But in such small things life is splendidly tenacious; and the one worthless tooth that caused it all is through at last. The rest of the journey will be pure joy."

"Thank God!"

"I have," she answered simply, smiling at the fervour of his tone. "And oh, *how* I shall sleep to-night!"

"Are you too tired to stay out a little now?"

"No. I meant to stay, just to breathe in the large peacefulness of the night and shake off the horror. See—there's the moon showing behind the hills. Come to the edge of the cliff and watch her rise above the river."

So they went out into the darkness and stood together at the end of the little garden overlooking the Jhelum—sole voice in the silence that enfolded them; while a tawny, misshapen moon slipped up out of the nether dark into the limitless vault of heaven. Deserting the hills, her luminosity grew wide and wider. Sharp edges became blurred. Higher prominences paled from black to pearl grey. Mountains, trees and huddled human dwellings made deeper mysteries of gloom; and from the whole came fragrant breathings of the sleeping earth.

Had the woman dreamed of the contending forces at war within the man, she could hardly have put his self-mastery to severer test. But to-night's danger-point was past. Susceptible as he was to external influences, and aware in every nerve of her inaccessible nearness, the fear, that had so lately shaken the foundations of his manhood, died a natural death in the atmosphere of her serene confidence in the best of him. Despite an unconquerable conviction that he alone could awaken that which still slept in her, he saw clearly that to gain her would be to lose her; to forfeit everything that gave him value, in her eyes and his own. Yet he found it no easy task to keep a cool head and a steady pulse while standing close beside her thus, in the crescent moonlight; tantalized as he was by the knowledge that her thoughts had travelled miles away from him, beyond the stars, into the lunar spaces of the spirit.

She came back to earth at last; and, turning, looked up with a smile that thrilled him like a caress.

"The peace that passeth understanding," she said softly, speaking below her breath as if in Church. "One comes measurably near to understanding it on such a night, and in such surroundings. Every-day talk seems almost profanation.—You don't mind?"

"Of course not. I know the feeling—dimly."

"I felt sure you did. I begin to think it's one of your talents—taking things the right way."

The simple tribute—wrung from tragic experience of a man whose talent lay in the opposite direction—played havoc with those mutinous pulses of his; and he was thankful that, in speaking, she moved back towards the house. For his life, he could not have answered her just then.

In the verandah she gave him her hand.

"Good-night—my friend," she said, crowning him with the utmost he could hope for on this side heaven. "I'm afraid Baby and I are treating you rather cavalierly. But still—I don't know what we should have done without you.—To-morrow Baramulla, and the real Kashmir!"

"Yes—to-morrow," he answered, smiling bravely, but for all his self conquest, he could not echo the glad anticipation in her tone.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

Fearlessly fair
And triumphant he stands,
And holds unaware
Friends' hearts in his hands.

—SWINBURNE.

The remaining two days of that unforgettable journey more than fulfilled Lyndsay's anticipation; though, for Laurence, the strands of joy and pain were so closely interwoven as to form that nameless product which cannot rightly be called either, and which yet transcends both. As for little Monica, throughout the drive to Baramulla, she slept the deep sleep of exhaustion cradled in the man's tireless arms; and Lyndsay, watching them from t me to time, could not but wonder whether in the circumstances Videlle himself would have done as much.

Thus, strangely drawn, by the child, into a community of thought and feeling diversely delightful to both, they cast the miles and the hours behind them all too speedily. On, steadily on, through narrowing gorges, where cataracts leaped and sparkled; where snow-streaked wastes and cliffs, crowned with pine and fir, smote sharply upon the luxuriance of pastureland, orchard and grove:—till, of a sudden, the rocky gateway fell back on either hand; the roar of the river subsided; and behold—far-stretching to the uttermost limit of vision—India's enchanted valley, ringed with blue, battlemented hills, whose gleaming summits, peak out-soaring peak, seemed to melt and tremble into a light-filled sky.

An avenue of whispering poplars culminated in the little river-side town of Baramulla; its rest-house set upon the water's edge; its crowd of half-enclosed punts, noisy with boatmen and their families, by whose united efforts travellers are propelled through delectable reaches of river and lake into the waterways of Srinagar—Venice of the East.

"Are those what Mrs. Rivers called *doongahs*?" Lyndsay asked, as they alighted at the bungalow.

"Yes. It's the ideal way of going on. Wish I might take you. It could easily be arranged even now."

But Videlle, having decreed otherwise, and promised to bring her back that way himself, Lyndsay shook her head, regretfully inexorable; and he forebore to press the point.

On this, their last evening, they sat late in the verandah, watching the restless lights and shadows upon the steel-grey stillness of the River Road, and the denser dark of the hills beyond; their closer intimacy proven by spells of silence that brought no sense of awkwardness, but seemed rather to supplement the limitations of speech. And, upon the fourth day of their wonder-journey, sunset found them nearing the little European colony, outside Srinagar; a winding reach of the river, with bungalows planted casually among the noble plane trees that in summer bestow their "prodigy of shade" upon almost every road and meadow in the Valley.

Here, at the rest house, Quita Lenox awaited them with her own attendant cavalier,—a man in the making; erect as a young pine; the small comely face set in a burnished aureole of hair; the sunlight of six unshadowed summers in the hazel-grey eyes.

Quita—with a private twinkle—introduced him gravely as "Sir Paul Desmond"; and Laurence laid a friendly hand upon the shining head.

"I was with your father all last winter, little chap. A grand soldier. Of course you mean to be one too—eh?"

"Yes, a-course; *an'* a V. C." Sir Paul announced with becoming modesty; and Quita laughed.

"Nothing like aiming high, if you mean to get there!—Now Mrs. Videlle, please patronise my pillows! Tongas bruise every bone in one's body.—D'you know, Paul, you're talking to a real V. C. this minute?

"*Are* I?—Oh!" The grave eyes surveyed Laurence in awed admiration; and upon his muttered protest: "Mrs. Lenox! why did you give me away?" a cool hand was slipped into his.

"Tell it me now—please. I only know one V. C. story—that's Favers—"

"Well suppose you tell that instead," Laurence sug-

gested, catching gratefully at a straw. "I've never properly heard it, you know."

The child's gaze widened. "Oh—I fort everybody had. Didn't he never tell you—not at Gilgit?"

"Not he! Soldiers leave that to other people. Did he tell you?"

No. Muvver did." Dimly be began to see why. "It's my 'good-night' story for Sunday; so I know it out of heart. Shall I say it—truly?"

"Do, old man." And drawing a chair to the table, Laurence sat down, still keeping an arm round him.

Then, while Quita dispensed tea, and Lyndsay lay back among her pillows, delighting in the boy's unconscious loveliness, Paul Desmond told the story of Alla Dad Khan's rescue in much the same words as Paul Wyndham had told it to his mother ten years ago; recited it rather, in a reverential monotone, looking straight before him, his hearers half-forgotten, in the eternal thrill that neither years, nor sorrows, nor over-civilization can quite root out of the human heart. And to Laurence as he listened came the poignant thought that the virtue of his one good minute, such as it was, would be doubled, nay trebled, could he ever hope to see it thus inspire the blossoming soul of a child—and that child his own. The recital ended, he drew Desmond's son closer; and, to the surprise of both women, kissed his cheek.

"Thank you, Sir Paul. That was fine. Perhaps, some day, when I come to Gulmerg, I'll tell you my story, quietly by our two selves."

Paul's eyes danced. "Coz I'm a really soldier, same as you?—True bargain?"

"True bargain."

"All right. I'll 'member.—Now may I please go and see vat very new Baby? It's a bonnet-one; an' I do like bonnet-ones tremenjously."

"A really soldier, beyond question!" Quita answered laughing; and, accepting that for permission, he bolted through the chick.

"What a stunning little chap! He'll be his father all over," Laurence commented; and Lyndsay heard, with a pang, the note of regret in his voice. But it was Quita who answered.

"Yes. He's a gem of a child. Born with a soul—"

"Is that unusual?"

"More so than you'd believe! Most of us have to grow one by slow and painful degrees. But then he's the outcome of a quite unique marriage; and if he belonged to anyone but Honor Desmond, I should 'burgle' him without compunction! As it is I borrow him whenever I can. She's been firing him lately with tales of Arthur Knights and such like; and the creature's so brimful of imagination that he hardly seems to live in our sordid world of tables and chairs and mutton chops,—which explains my form of introduction! He goes off on lonely expeditions, hoping to find damsels in distress; and it was entirely in that capacity that I was escorted down here! We took our fifteen miles each day very quietly; and he rode them like a man. I believe he'd have ridden the whole thirty without giving in. But in spite of Honor's mania for hardening him, I didn't dare try. He must go back in the tonga for all his knighthood—and I hope the Bonnet-baby may reconcile him to his fate!"

"How old is he?"

"Not yet six and a half."

"'Six years had given him, for an angel's heart, a child's instead,'" Lyndsay quoted softly; and Quita beamed upon her.

"How delightfully apt. Was it impromptu? Mrs. Rivers told me you were a poet!"

Lyndsay blushed hotly. "It's Swinburne;—and dear Mrs. Rivers overestimates my mild accomplishments. If there ever was a poet in me, she died long ago!"

"Don't ask *me* to believe that," Laurence remarked with a quiet suggestion of fuller knowledge, his gaze lingering on her transfigured face.

Some nameless quality in look and tone set Quita's nimble intuitions on the alert. A certain scene under the pear trees at Gilgit sprang to her mind; and his open amazement at her question: "Did she have eyes like those violets?" A glance at Mrs. Videlle's face answered that: and, remembering Monica Rivers' account of Videlle, Quita's rebel spirit raged against the perversities of life.

Finding herself, next morning, momentarily alone with Laurence, while the tonga was preparing, she remarked

with quickened interest: "Are you really coming to Gulmerg?"

"Well—that depends on the Colonel. Is he likely to get across soon?"

"Fairly soon, I hope, for three weeks. A generous allowance, after eight months without him!" The undernote of wistfulness went to his heart. "D'you mean —would you like to come when he does?"

"I would, immensely. I shall be knocking round Astor and Bunji again this summer; and I thought he might let me take fifteen days when he came through."

"Shall I ask him to?"

"That would be noble of you."

"Not quite so noble as it sounds! With Eldred there, I should be glad to have Mrs. Videlle happily provided for. She's a beautiful little person; and you seem to be good friends."

"Yes—we are."

"That's settled then. Here she comes. Don't trouble to put me up. See after them."

And from the vantage ground of her saddle, Quita—an emmissary of Fate—watched the leave-taking in the tonga; saw little Monica clutch confidingly the finger that caressed her cheek; and wondered very much whether Eldred would grant those fifteen days—if he guessed.

"But the dear man's divinely dense in such matters. He'll never see it; and, after all, why should I insult two obviously straight people by making a mountain out of a probable mole hill?"

Thus she juggled with conscience, while Laurence, gently releasing his finger, grasped the mother's hand.

"*Au revoir*, I hope," he said, with deliberate cheerfulness. "By the Colonel's mercy I may get a week or ten days in Gulmerg before very long." Then he turned to Paul, who had usurped his seat—after protests. "Take good care of them both, little man. I hand over my charge to you!"

Words lightly spoken yet accepted in all seriousness, by the embryo knight, eager for the privilege of service; and before the journey's end Lyndsay had lost her heart to Theo Desmond's son, who returned the compliment with the pristine fervour of six and a half years on earth.

Up the last steep stretch of bridle path they walked, for the most part, between pines that "climbed the hill-side like an army"; the evening air growing cooler and more fragrant each step of the way; and at last, through a high narrow cutting, they emerged quite suddenly into the "meadow of flowers,"—two miles of undulating turf, ringed darkly with battalions of pine, and watched over, through the ages, by multitudinous white peaks of the Pir Punjál and the Hindu Kush. The glade itself, on this memorable June evening, radiantly justified its name. Everywhere the prevailing tone of green was lavishly splashed with colour. Purple and white of iris; tall forget-me-nots, blue as gentian; and, high above all, columbines in their thousands drooped graceful, starry heads. Everywhere, too, on commanding knolls, or among sheltering groups of trees, tents, log-huts and scattered bungalows gave a friendly aspect to this cradle of rest set in the lap of stony-hearted hills.

The three stood still a moment that Lyndsay might take her fill of the scene. "An earthly paradise," she murmured; and Quita nodded.

"On the whole—yes; except when it rains; and it *can* rain here. Then the polo ground becomes an impromptu lake; and we grow mushrooms inside our boots! We used to sleep under mackintoshes slung across the ceiling, till Eldred disfigured our picturesque porous roof with rows of over-lapping planks. That conspicuously Philistine building—" she indicated landmarks with her riding whip—"is, I need hardly say, the Maharajah's palace. Opposite, by way of contrast, our modest little Church. The Hotel rambles casually along that spur, above the inevitable Club-house; and here, on our right, is Hut No. 23. My Palace of Truth, I call it; for it's rough as truth, outside and in!"

"I shall like it the better," Lyndsay answered, smiling at the quaint conceit.

"I'm beginning to believe you will. Come and be introduced." She took possession of Lyndsay's arm. "From Mrs. Rivers' letter you seemed such a porcelain person that I felt just a little afraid of having offered you a corner in my prehistoric abode! But I'm not afraid now."

"N'more aren't I!" echoed Sir Paul slipping his hand into hers; a confiding form of caress that won him more hearts than he would ever know.

The Palace of Truth did not belie its name. A four-roomed log hut, it was, casually plastered with mud, and perched upon a hillock in the midst of towering pines. All four rooms stood in a row, giving upon the narrow verandah by means of a plank door, with chain fastenings, and each one boasting a roughly-shuttered, unglazed window, only to be closed at the risk of suffocation. Neither garden, nor gate, nor paling prated of an undue craze for privacy. From the verandah's edge you stepped straight out into Kashmir. On a small level space beside it a tent was pitched.

"My spare room," Quita explained, with an expansive flourish of her whip, "though I am not treating *you* as an outpatient! And there, on the other side, is my forest nursery, where the creatures eat and live from cockcrow to sundown—till the rains arrive! Idyllic,—*n'est-ce-pas?*"

The nursery in question was a flower-spangled knoll with red pine-stems for pillars, and for roof their spreading boughs. Rugs, camp-furniture, see-saw and swing fulfilled the needs of three uncritical people whose united years hardly amounted to eight; and who were enjoying day's last moments clamorously, the see-saw being the centre of attraction.

"The angel with the halo is Paul's sister, Thea," Quita concluded her running comment, "and of course the plain one's mine!"

A statement promptly corroborated by the plain one, who fell headlong from her perch, and, with shrieks of glee, precipitated herself into wide-flung arms; while Lyndsay was lured on to inspect a hut of pine branches which her small worshipper was building for occult purposes of his own.

Though the spell of the journey was ended, she did but seem to have stepped from one dream-world into another, hardly less enchanting. Her tiny bedroom twelve feet by twelve, with its mud floor, unvarnished walls, and one window that framed the heart of a wood, gave her a sense of having found something she had long unconsciously

craved, and would not soon let go. For a time, at least, it seemed that heaven's watchword over her was to be peace; a peace made musical, at that moment, by voices and laughter of young things going riotously to rest in the next room.

And the evening that followed enhanced the charm and restfulness of it all;—the casual meal on a camp table in the verandah outside their one sitting-room; glimpses of the darkening Merg, seen through black bars of intervening pine stems, and lit by occasional torches that marshalled shadowy forms riding or walking out to dinner; the spontaneous sparkle of Quita's humour, that even the ache of separation and anxiety was powerless to quench. Then when the table had folded itself up and gone indoors, and coffee, served in tea cups, was set upon a tiny substitute between their carpet-chairs, the two women slipped into more serious talk, that revealed to Lyndsay yet another facet of her new friend's character; and extinguished Quita's fear of the "porcelain person" for good. More than ever she rebelled against the perversity of things that had prevented Alan Laurence from winning a wife whose eminently suitability was proven, in Quita's opinion, by their noticeable unlikeness of temperament and type. Four years of marriage and motherhood had developed in her a glimmering sense of responsibility; and, having every intention of persuading Eldred to bring Laurence up with him, she could not choose but wonder how matters stood between the two. More than once she introduced his name unexpectedly, and in so doing watched Lyndsay's face for the slightest sign of that which she had clearly seen in his—without result.

By the time they parted for the night her scruples had vanished. "It's a one-sided tragedy," she assured herself while brushing out her hair. "And even if it weren't, Mrs. Videlle would be the last to discover it. For all her brains, she's just an early Victorian angel, born a few decades out of time; and I think Captain Laurence may be trusted not to damage her wings! Poor dear fellow! Why on earth shouldn't he have a week's happiness, and at the same time enable me to see more of my man?"

Thus, all unguessed by Lyndsay, the matter was settled; while she herself—lifted to new heights of hope and joy,

by the ancient majesty of the mountains, and the infectious spirit of youth that pervaded Quita's Hut—felt her whole nature expanding, like a flower brought from darkness into light. Even a few days wrought noticeable changes in herself and little Monica; sufficed also to deaden her bitter mingling of shame and envy in comparing her own child with the clear-skinned, bright-headed Desmonds or with Quita's fair-haired son. But pride and will, and the sweet reasonableness that was hers, reiterated the futility of resenting the unescapable; and already she could think more hopefully of the fresh start on which all her hidden thoughts were centred. If only some misguided man could be convinced that Carrie's presence was necessary to his salvation!

As for Videlle—mere absence enabled her idealism to slur over his host of minor failings and magnify the great outstanding fact of his love. But the fourth day brought an unwelcome assertion of those minor failings, that, after all, create the major miseries of life. His reply to her letter from Domel brought the man too vividly before her in his least admirable aspect. She could almost hear the scathing tone of his voice as he expressed himself gratified that Laurence's company had made her journey more enjoyable than it would have been alone; a deliberate distortion of her so different statement that brought the red of anger to her cheeks. At the same time, he felt bound to add that, in his opinion, Laurence had no call to take upon himself the charge of another man's wife and child; especially seeing that he—Videlle—had gone to the trouble and expense of supplying them with a sufficient escort in the shape of his personal servant whom he could *trust*. Another time he would make a point of managing to get leave, and would himself see her safely to her destination. Whether he acquitted them of preconceived design it was impossible to tell; but the whole tone of the letter jarred her unspeakably; reawakened the haunting fear that—do what she might there could be no real fresh start; only the surface peace that was no peace, since at the heart of it lurked smothered discord.

The whole incident so upset her equanimity that—Quita having gone to lunch and sketch with a friend—she slipped out alone among the pines, basely avoiding the

nursery region,—where a small knight looked hopefully for her advent; and making for a certain open space whence her eye could travel a clear hundred miles, to where Nanga Purbat towered—a giant even among his peers. A lichen-coated ledge of granite proffered an inviting seat; and here she sat her down in full view of the mountain of her dreams, that had its own message for her, as have all great mountains for those who possess ears to hear. Slowly, imperceptibly, her perturbed spirit attuned itself to the wide luminous calm of earth and sky; and, in the stillness, lines that had been her talisman throughout the past difficult year, spoke renewed patience to her heart.

"Power is man's by that great word of Wait,
To still the sea of tears and shake the iron heart of Fate."

Her will to wrest success from seeming failure must not be shaken by a minor reverse; and her faith in the soft answer was supreme. In writing she made no allusion to Laurence or to his probable reappearance on the scene. Even such slight reservation went against the grain; but the wisdom of silence was too patent to be disregarded. When the matter was settled, his coming should be announced, as part of the current news.

On that resolve she rose and strolled leisurely homeward, with lighter step and heart, filling her hands with wild flowers as she went. No need to avoid the nursery now. She hurried towards it rather; eager to make amends for her desertion of Paul. From afar it was evident that great events were taking place outside his hut of pine boughs,—the theatre of countless adventures. To-day he appeared to be resisting an onslaught from the two small girls, who waved ineffectual fir branches and yelled wildly in accordance with previous stage directions from the enemy; while old Miriam hovered on the outskirts of the fray with the nervous restlessness of a hen whose one chicken has been abstracted.

At sight of Lyndsay he flourished his own weapon for greeting.

"Oh, Mrs. V'delle,—come quick! A horde of cannibals are wanting to murder Baby, an' I'm 'fending her with my life!"

In proof whereof he staggered under a caressing flick from Honor's branch, and falling to earth with dramatic realism, announced in sepulchral tones; "Now I'm corpsed—with a cloven skull."

The statement produced a strange effect on the cannibals. With a wail too genuine to be part of the programme, one-half of the horde flung itself bodily upon the prostrate knight.

"Oh Boy, come 'live—come 'live 'gain!" it besought him, tugging at his hair; and was repulsed with a sigh of irritation by him of the cloven skull.

"Oh Fea—you are a silly baby. You spoil everyfing."

An instant later he was on his feet, racing down the slope to meet Lyndsay and tucking a hand under her arm.

"She's quite safe, Mrs. V'delle. Lying on a cushion, with her rattle, in my hut. Come 'long, let's do flowers. Aunt Quita orways lets me have the tired ones for my vases, coz it's unkind to frow vem away."

"Such a really truly knight!" Lyndsay answered, kissing the eager uplooking face; and the two went on together, to beautify the little sitting-room against Quita's return. It surprised Lyndsay to find how much of solace and stimulant she derived from the companionship of this heavenly-hearted child, who brought his two vases of tired flowers, to be replenished from hers, and gravely consulted her as to which were "very dead" enough to be consigned to the dust heap without risk of hurting their feelings. This urgent problem settled, the champion of distressed damsels returned to his favourite topic, leaning one elbow on the table as he talked and gazing worshipfully up into a face whose intrinsic beauty he could feel, if he could not understand. Being of an age when feeling demands expression, his admiration vented itself at last in quaintly characteristic speech.

"Mrs. V'delle," he said suddenly after a short reflective silence."

"Yes, dear?"

"You know—you're such a lovely lady, you did ought to have a proper knight, to serve you, and 'fend you from enemies—" He was quick to suspect amusement in her smile. " 'Tisn' only a game," he pleaded earnestly.

"Vat man, Captain Laurence, said I must keep care of you. Mayn't I? Are I too small?"

"No, darling, no. The rightest possible size. But where are the enemies?"

He frowned, seriously considering the question.

"That's just what I don't know. There used to be—lots. P'raps the other knights in the Arthur Book killed them all. It's rather a bother—but still—"

"Never mind, Paul," Lyndsay consoled him, running her fingers through his thick hair. "There are plenty of other ways to help."

"Are there? May I? An'—will you—" he hesitated; shy entreaty in his eyes. "Proper ladies give their knights somefin' to wear in their helmet, to show they belong—"

In Lyndsay's smile there was no amusement now, but a great tenderness.

"Bring me your helmet," she said; and he brought his discarded sailor hat, holding it with hands that trembled while she fixed her own glove firmly between the ribbon and the straw. "There; will that do? Now you're my true knight for always and always."

"O-oh," he breathed, his heart big with things inexpressible; then quite gravely he kissed her hand that rested on the table; and Lyndsay only refrained from taking him in her arms lest an embrace at such a moment might hurt his new-found dignity of manhood. Instead she crowned him with the glorified helmet; and he went proudly out, yearning to do battle for her against the world; while she, poor soul, stood looking after him in frame of mind forbidden by the tenth Commandment.

"What it would be to have such a son!" was the irrepressible cry of her heart; then stooping, she studied, with renewed interest, the photo of Desmond that stood on a corner table; and had her answer there. Such fathers are needed for the making of such sons; and, for the first time, since that long ago night of rebellion and despair, she dared not think of her husband.

But the soft answer was written that night before she slept, and the "great word of Wait" was set like a seal upon her heart.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

Such a soul, to saddest end,
  Finds Love the foe, in Love the Friend;
And—ah grief incredible—
  Treads the way of Heaven,—to Hell.
—F. Thompson.

And while Lyndsay hoped against hope for the dawn of better things, James Videlle was giving place to the Devil in his worst form,—doubt of the beloved woman; doubt more fundamental, more seemingly justifiable than any he had yet known.

Alone, he might conceivably have acquitted the pair of complicity as regards that journey, the thought of which spurred him to barren, corrosive anger against both. But with Carrie at his elbow stating, in plain terms, the sinister whisper at his heart, Lyndsay's soft answer proved of little avail. Rather did her sweet-tempered disregard of his protest, her abstention from explanation or defence, seem to endorse Carrie's bare-faced insinuations, refuted by him the more hotly because his baser self had, in secret, gone over to the enemy. He had even so far demeaned himself as to argue the point; and, in crises of this kind, who descends to argument is lost;—the more certainly should his opponent be a Carrie Vansittart.

If the whole thing had been planned, why had she been ready to throw it all up at the last minute? Argument the first: received by Carrie with a smile of pity for his blindness.

"Easee enough to make sacrifices when you are *quite* sure they will not be accepted," had been her immediate counter-thrust.

"I made believe to accept though; and she never wavered—"

Then memory of her fainting fit stabbed him; and, seeing it suddenly in a new light, he was smitten dumb.

Could it have been, not mere fatigue, but release from the tension of suspense? Had she been most grossly deceiving him at the crowning moment of his belief in her? Questions inspired by the devil he had nursed. But Lyndsay was Lyndsay, after all; incomparable wife and mother; not lightly to be condemned; which fact, asserted with authority, might have given Carrie pause, had he not capped it, weakly, with a second argument, to the effect that she need not have mentioned Laurence at all.

Whereat Carrie so far lost patience and discretion as to denounce him for a fool, adding, with fine contempt for the gullibility of the man in love: "Better she than Karim Bux,—*hein?* Linsee has oll her wits about her. Those quiet ones, who play to be saints are olways the worst; and you men are so vain. You think she is devoted, and such kind of stuff. Oll the same I would bet my best bangle that she has never reallee cared, in her heart; and quite likelee she would be glad of a flare up now, that might, in the end, set her free—"

But almost before the word was out Videlle took her roughly by the shoulders, and, with a furious expletive, thrust her from the room.

"That's the way you repay her services, you black-hearted woman! I have been lenient with you on account of your trouble; but by God I'll turn you out, bag and baggage, if you dare mention her again!"

The futility of both threat and command had become cruelly clear to him the moment he was alone; and to her no less—in due time; though never had she seen such fury in his eyes, nor heard such violent language from him as the oath with which he had thundered her into silence. For an hour or two, genuine fear possessed her that at length she had gone too far; at length, struck adamant beneath the quicksands of his nature. But it was the curse of the man that he could make no lasting impression, for good or evil; and his very violence proved that she had struck home. Swear at her he might; yet, if she knew the man, her words would haunt and torment him till he grew to believe them true; and then—? Adversity has no sweet uses for the Carries of this world; and the whole entanglement,—with its dramatic possibilities,

its unknown quantity, in the shape of Laurence's precise effect upon Lyndsay —was so entirely after this woman's heart, that it lifted her from her slough of misery and revived her suspended interest in life. Lyndsay's absence, also, made it fatally easy to overlook her gentleness and patience; to magnify the galling sense of injury that justified Carrie in utilising Videlle's fatal readiness to believe the worst.

Throughout the weeks that followed the man paid penalty in full for that same readiness, which all his life he had unheedingly encouraged, and could not shake off at will; though even now, he had not sunk so low as to suspect his Lyndsay of open disloyalty. It was Carrie's implication of that, which had fired him to a white heat of anger; fierce, as it was transient. At worst he dreaded implicit understanding between the two, thinly veiled by a chimerical friendship, which Videlle was the last man to credit. But the suspicion that lip-service might be his perpetual portion stung him past endurance.

And his ill-mood was darkened by the secret weakness that was steadily sapping his manhood and brain and will. Since Lyndsay's departure he had unconsciously relaxed the measure of restraint her presence enforced; and fearing the keen eyes of Finlay—not yet able to follow his star —had taken to leaving Mess early, the better to enjoy his chosen familiars—tantalus, syphon and cigar. Even the lure of the card table was losing its hold; and, worse than all, the work which had been the sheet anchor of his character, was becoming an irksome duty, to be got through mechanically with the smallest expenditure of of time and trouble. A year ago the persistence of plague as late as June would have roused his professional interest. Now it seemed almost a personal affront. That way lay ultimate failure and disgrace; but the man was nearing a state in which nothing seemed to matter vitally save satisfaction of the moment's need. And now the thought of Lyndsay—hitherto his talisman—had been so poisoned by Carrie's insinuations, *plus* his own jealousy, that it goaded him rather toward the final catastrophe that would spell ruin for them both.

So the weeks lagged by with increasing heat and thirst, and no decrease of strain for the man who was fighting

an unseen foe, both in others and himself. Then one evening, after an unsatisfactory day—ending in a few straight words from the Civil Surgeon, who suspected the truth,—Videlle came home to find a letter from Lyndsay announcing the fact that Captain Laurence had followed Colonel Lenox to Gulmerg, for a week's stay. "The latter has been with us ten days already," Lyndsay wrote. "A great joy for his wife." Of herself, not a word; and Videlle, fired to red-hot wrath by this unforeseen turn of the wheel, pondered darkly on the significance of the omission. It needed only this to complete the sinister mood that was upon him. Already, to-day, he had come within an ace of affronting his one real friend in the station; and now, this untoward bolt from the blue quickened in him all the devils that mixed blood and ungoverned passions are heir to. Lyndsay's renewed abstention from comment left the field clear for Carrie's evil spirit to work in. Almost, at that moment, he had justified her unvarnished opinion of them both. But this time he would keep his own counsel. If she dared to confirm his fear, he knew he should strike her; and although he could implicitly insult a woman—as he was insulting Lyndsay now; he had never struck one yet.

Had he written differently after the journey Lyndsay might have softened her news by some lightly tender injunction not to make a mountain of a mole-hill; but his tone and her own woman's fastidiousness made any detailed mention of the subject hateful to her. So, from first to last, they worked at cross purposes, with a persistence that had seemed fiendish, but that its entire absence of design made it pitiful rather,—seeing that they were man and wife. More and more he grew convinced that Laurence had planned, and manipulated the whole scheme—with or without Lyndsay's cognisance? There sprang the question of questions—to which no answer was forthcoming, save Carrie's haunting sneer.

"Damn the man! What in hell possessed me to let her go?" he muttered, tearing the sheet across and across. Then habit conquered; and he slipped it into his pocket. After all, Lyndsay had written it. Lyndsay had signed herself 'Your loving wife'; and she would not subscribe her name to a lie.

"Sahib."

It was the voice of Karim Bux at the door; the voice of imperitent necessities that no tragedy may silence.

"Well?"

"Will your Honour require the *tum-tum* for Mess?"

"No."

"But the Mem-Sahib is out. Shall Khudah Bux prepare dinner?"

"I have no hunger. Give me anything there is."

And the good man departed, wagging his beard. "Heaven grant the great sickness hath not descended upon the Sahib."

A great sickness indeed! Greater even than the plague; since it laid violent hands not merely on a man's body; but also on his soul.

In less than twenty minutes Videlle had eaten a negligible quantity of whatever there was, with a fastidious disrelish not wholly due to the heat; and had delivered himself up, for the evening, to his three familiars, while the Devil—an uninvited fourth—consoled him after the fashion of Job's friends, with a running fire of suggestions and possibilities such as the man who had taken Lyndsay Vereker to wife had no shadow of right to entertain. To-night the stimulant he relied on failed to produce even temporary exhilaration. Moment by moment his smouldering wrath burnt the fiercer, like a live coal in the deepening dark of his ill humour. If, after nearly winning her, he had again lost his slight hold on Lyndsay, further efforts to regain it would avail him little—now. Worse still,—on her return she would probably suspect the truth, as rough, kind-hearted Doctor Routh had already done; and, for all her gentleness, he could expect no leniency in that regard. Look where he would a black horizon fronted him. No rift of light anywhere; least of all, within. "If the light within thee be darkness—" There you have the gist of the man's tragedy. The light within being darkness, the light without could avail him nothing. Not that he recognised this even now. The red mist of anger blinded him to all else; definite anger against Lyndsay and Laurence; vague, heart-searing anger against the whole ironic scheme of things.

And now, once more, the idea of self-slaughter thrust

itself upon him—in a new guise. No flash of inspiration masquerading as magnanimity; but the simplest possible method of escape from the unendurable; nay more—the devil's thought chimed in with his morbid mood—a method of retaliation which, if he knew anything of Lyndsay, would crush her under the weight of life-long remorse, and make marriage with Laurence intolerable to her, at least for many years to come. The idea fired his heated brain.

"Since I seem fated to go to the deuce in any case," was his extenuating thought, "what matter if I force the pace a bit, and give her a taste of the hell I've suffered on her account? By God—and I'll do it too. D——d if I don't."

Then, dimly realizing that his sole chance of achievement lay in striking before the iron cooled, he dragged himself up, none too steadily; sat down at his table, and wrote—with a pen dipped in vitriol—such a letter as his normal self had deemed impossible—from him to her.

In order to make it possible, he must needs start by accusing her bluntly of a tacit understanding with Laurence, and of hoodwinking her husband into a blind faith that left her free to enjoy herself without restraint, while he slaved and screwed in the heat for the benefit of her and her child. He hinted further at amassed bills, which the expense of sending her away and living at Mess,—to say nothing of losses at cards—would make it a difficult matter to pay; adding that though women were notoriously slack in regard to minor points of honour, it struck him "as playing rather low down" to spend one man's money—which he could ill afford—mainly to get within easier reach of another;—and so forth; inciting himself, as he went, to credence of his preposterous statements, and capping all with the final one that, thanks to the misery he had endured at her hands, he no longer found life worth living. "You may even be glad of that—God knows!" he wound up; stirred to supreme self pity by recital of his wrongs. "At all events, if you hear no more from me, you probably will from Carrie—"

At this point his pen, which had sped over the paper, paused. He frowned and sat biting the end of it; confronting the cold fact, and realizing that, as yet, he had

not given it a thought. Now the inexorable "How" and "When" presented themselves, with the unconcern of warders come to lead a man to the gallows. What did he really mean by that last sentence? He had spoken once of shooting himself; but weapons were not to his taste; and in these days suicide, like everything else, has been made fatally easy; the more so for a doctor, with all the needful drugs at command. Yes; the bare act would be simplicity itself; and he was Oriental enough to see neither shame nor horror in the idea. And yet—and yet—Life, at its most miserable and worthless, was still —Life: a precious vessel, easy to destroy, impossible to reconstruct. Slowly the fever of wrath gave place to a chill certainty that neither disgrace, nor despair, nor the torments of the damned could give him strength to lift a hand against himself.

What of his letter then—and Lyndsay's punishment? Was he doomed to drag on from bad to worse; and fizzle out in the end like a damp squib?

Suddenly the morrow's programme recurred to him; suggesting the possible hand of Fate that would, of a surety, prove steadier than his own. He had promised Dr. Routh to start at daybreak for an important village fifteen miles out Kohat way, where terribly insanitary conditions prevailed, and the Faithful were reported to be concealing cases of plague, which the hot weather and the indefatigable white man had almost stamped out of Peshawur City—for the nonce. At least, he must go there first and take his chance. Afterwards—? Well,—he was not "up to the mark,"—nor in the mood to trouble about precautions. Why not leave Fate to give the casting vote; and so avoid the burden of decision—the bugbear of his life?

In the meantime Lyndsay's letter must be finished. He allowed the broken sentence to stand, and briefly chronicled his news. "And if any harm comes to me," he added in a fresh access of spleen, "so much the better for us both. I am sick to death of the whole show; and as for you—no doubt you will contrive to look becomingly forlorn for a time; and then—Curse you both! I'm not the blind fool you think me, Lyndsay; and if I could kill Laurence first, I should die happy. As it is—well, my

state of mind is of no great consequence tc *you*—is it? J. V."

Without re-reading the execrable effusion, he slipped it hastily, into an envelope; sealed, stamped, addressed it; and shouting for Karim Bux bade him take it to the Post Office the first thing next morning. Instinct warned him that if it lay on his table all night, it would never be sent; and like many vacillators, his will held firm precisely when vacillation would have served him best. With a sigh of weariness he lay back in his chair; and to his fevered mood succeeded an apathy of mind and body that craved only sleep. A fresh peg fulfilled his need; and waking in the small hours, stiff and comfortless, with a throat like leather, he crept shamefacedly to bed.

Loud were Carrie's lamentations on learning that solitude was to be her portion for three whole days; louder still when the nature of Videlle's work transpired. She lived in unreasoning terror of the plague. Its decrease in Peshawur had greatly eased her mind; and now—

"That is thee worst of you Doctor people," she protested brokenly. "Olways some kind of horror; and it is cruel to leave me when you know how badlee I get the creeps since—since—" Tears choked her speech, but she battled on; and Videlle, who had waked late, was in too great a hurry to pay much heed. "Doctor Routh is a *budmash** to send you, just now when you are looking oll to pieces too. But you *will* take everee precaution, won't you Jimmee—because—"

"Precautions be damned!" Videlle answered slamming the lid of his cash-box and turning the key. "Get Mrs. Lucas in if you feel jumpy. A man must go where he's sent; and—*jo hogá—so hoga.*† Good-bye old girl. Expect me when you see me. I must be off."

Thirty-six hours later he stood in his stifling tent near the village of Miranghat, tired out with a long day of house to house visiting in the sun. Work that would once have interested him, now produced irritability and disgust; both of which showed in his face as he flung off his drill coat. Something in it knocked against the chair

*Villain. †What will be, will be.

and fell out. With a start he stooped and picked it up. It was Lyndsay's miniature.

For many minutes he stood staring at it—spell-bound, while the words he had written two nights ago bit into his brain like white-hot irons. He knew now—too late—that no earthly wrong she could do would affect his fierce ungoverned love for her. Wrong? She was incapable of wronging him, even in thought. That he knew, also—too late; since, with his own hand, he had written words which must ruin everything—even if he lived. By this time he would have given five years of life at its best to recall that letter. But the tonga that bore it to her was even then speeding past Domel *dák* bungalow, where Laurence—the supposed conspirator against him and his—had prayed that his child might live.

In a passionate impulse of remorse—barren as most of his impulses—Videlle pressed the cold picture to his lips; and, in the act, a creeping chill ran through him—

It was the hand of Fate—steadier, more relentless than his own. He recognised it next morning, past question; and with the recognition the unquenchable will to live reasserted itself with power. Better than most men in India he understood how to cheat this implacable horror of its prey. Now, if ever, that knowledge should stand him in good stead; and even if the worst befell,—if Lyndsay refused him forgiveness—at least he would have the satisfaction of standing between Laurence and the consummation of his heart's desire.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

One moment in annihilation's waste;
One moment of the cup of Life to taste.
—Omar Khayyam.

The sun that seared Peshawur and the stricken village of Miranghat filtered through vanishing rainclouds upon Gulmerg; and invaded tenderly the log verandah of Hut No. 23, where Laurence sat smoking, patiently impatient for his walk with Lyndsay, who was busy in her room finishing a letter to Videlle. It was Wednesday; the afternoon of that night on which he had so fatally displayed his own gift of penmanship; and on Saturday Laurence's week of weeks would be over.

Lenox, as usual, had carried off his wife for an arduous climb, and nothing short of the dinner hour would bring them back. "Divinely dense," in Quita's apt phrasing, it had not occurred to him to connect Lyndsay Videlle with Laurence's confidence of a year ago. Love of the man, and a characteristic fastidiousness, had banished the matter so completely from his thoughts that it lay half forgotten in a pigeon-hole of his brain, needing some event more arresting than the present chance conjunction to recall it to life; while Quita, plainly perceiving this, and noting how often Paul made a third with the other pair, had silenced her none too exacting conscience once for all.

The embryo knight had shown himself quaintly, engagingly tenacious of his dues; though, deep down, he had suffered incipient pangs of jealousy since the coming of this obviously competent protector, owner of the coveted decoration, and plainly devoted to the service of his beloved Mrs. Videlle. He sat now at the feet of his rival, dangling slender legs over the verandah's edge, and nursing the hat that still held his lady's favour. The story of its acquisition, told by Lyndsay, had touched the softest spot in Alan's heart. If he had loved the boy at sight for Desmond's sake, he had learnt, in these four

days, to love him for his own; though, being human, he occasionally asserted his prior right by carrying Lyndsay off on a lonely ramble, leaving the injured hero at the mercy of two inconveniently adoring babies till their return. But to-day, unknown to him, Lyndsay had pleaded for his inclusion in the programme; and while they waited her good pleasure, they were speculating gravely on the vexatious disappearance of enemies—as Paul understood them—from the face of the earth. His three weeks of knighthood had proved singularly barren of opportunities for heroic display of devotion.

"You see," he explained lucidly. " 'Twouldn' be much fun being a soldier if you couldn' fight; and 'tisn' much use promising to 'fend a lady, if no one never bothers her. But then,—she's the kind of lady that I'm 'fraid no one never will. She *is* lovely,—don't you think so?"

"Very lovely," Laurence agreed, looking thoughtfully out upon the landscape; and for some reason the admission seemed to trouble Paul.

"That's the bother of it," he murmured, crumpling his white brow. "Coz I was hoping,—p'raps—" It needed courage to complete the request. "P'raps—if *you* wouldn't mind—just for 'tending—"

"Oh Lord no," the man interposed quickly. "Not even to please you, old chap. You see," he added, as the sensitive face crimsoned under implied rebuke, "it might be all very well for someone else. But I'm her friend, Paul—just as much as you are."

Paul shook his head deliberately. "No! I'm the mostest. She said so."

"Did she? Then it must be true. But I was the firstest, anyhow!" he triumphed, entering boyishly into the spirit of the game.

"That's on'y chance. She didn't put her glove in your helmet."

"No."

"An' you mayn't call her Lady Lyndsay!"

"No—worse luck!"

The rattle of a chain brought the boy to his feet. "Oh *there* she is!—An' you mayn't kiss her, either!"

He fired the parting shot over his shoulder, and the next moment, flung himself, with unknightly impetuosity,

into Lyndsay's arms:—Lyndsay in an iris-blue muslin, with a wide hat, and cheeks whose delicate tinting, of health renewed, rivalled the wild roses of Kashmir.

"Oh, Lady Lyndsay, him an' me *are* so tired of waiting; an' we've been quarrelling who's your mostest friend. '*Tis* me, isn't it—please!"

"Why of course, darling. We settled that long ago." And keeping an arm round him she smiled at Laurence over his head.

He rose and straightened himself. "Where do I come in?" he asked lightly. "A lame second? I claim priority in point of time, at least!"

"I imagined you were old enough to set him a better example!" she chided, without severity. "As if my temple of friendship wouldn't hold half a dozen of you standing abreast!—Now, let's pay a call on Nanga Purbat, he's my mostest friend of all!"

"In that case, Sir Paul and I will join forces, and blow him up with dynamite—eh, little man?" Laurence answered laughing, and taking possession of a light wrap she carried; while Paul, eyeing it jealously, retaliated by clinging to her hand throughout the walk.

A radiant walk, it was, through a world of purple mountains dappled with shadows of flying cloud; their talk, now grave, now illumined by flashes of such tender happy nonsense as only the simple-hearted can find pleasure in. Could Videlle's spirit have accompanied them, his bewilderment would have been extreme. He would also have learnt more of Laurence and his wife than he had done in eighteen months of jealous brooding; and assuredly his hideous letter would never have been written.

Not until flushed sky and snows had faded into the pallor of twilight did they bend reluctant steps homeward; there to find other returned wanderers, even happier than themselves; and the day ended with music, and quiet talk between the men in the verandah; while the women lingered over their last look at the nursery people, whose hushed voices left the Hut uncannily still. Then to bed in the tent spare-room, and a glad awakening to one more day in Paradise:—a fool's paradise no doubt; an ecstacy shot through with anguish, that brought home to Laurence words, spoken by Quita in her Gilgit garden:

"the wretchedness only makes the joy strike deeper." So deep, indeed, that for all his native resilience and gift of happiness, it seemed to him that he had but caught at the flying skirt of the goddess till now. Each day as it stepped smiling out of infinitude, and, traversing the golden stairway of the hours, slipped down behind the snow-line in a scarf of opalescent cloud, was set in his memory like a jewel:—a possession for all time. Resolutely he banished thought of the inexorable last morning:—but it dawned in due course, as smilingly as the rest; and with as little concern for that which might befall two men and women among the myriads on whom it shone.

Lenox' brief holiday had been curtailed, as usual; this time by anxious news from Chitral. After lunch, therefore, the two men would ride down to Srinagar, spend the night on the Wular Lake, and at dawn embark upon the familiar rigours and splendours of the Gilgit road.

Throughout breakfast, talk was more fitful than its wont; a not unnatural state of things when three out of five people are sedulously edging away from the subject uppermost in their minds. Paul alone,—secretly elate—made good the opportunity of airing his crystalline views on such weighty matters as his own theory that butterflies were the souls of "dead people what loved flowers," and the folly of condemning boys to wear boots when toes clung "so much more comfily to trees."

It was Quita, who at last spoke the prevalent thought; Paul having deserted abstract speculation for concrete strawberries and cream.

"Last days are a refined form of torture. They should never have been invented!" she announced, *à propos de bottes*, veiling, under a resolute lightness, the rebellion at her heart.

"Hear, hear!" Laurence remarked, *sotto voce;* and Lenox—with grave conviction: "Quita, the fruit's gone to your head!"

Lyndsay looked up smiling. The big plain man, with his keen glance and dry humour attracted her strongly.

"But then—last days enhance the first ones, and keep the balance true."

"Possibly, you dear little philosopher,—*when* the first ones arrive! But I'm in no mood for logic,—or for

anything, except spending the morning with Eldred in my enchanted glade. So if you two are inspired to take a walk, please choose another direction!"

Laurence glanced across at Lyndsay. "Shall we?"

"Yes. I have an enchanted corner of my own that I've never shown you yet! Paul and I found it—didn't we, Boy?"

"Yes. But it's truly mine. I showed the way! Can't I come too?"

"Not this time, old man," Laurence interposed, patting the shapely head. "My turn to-day. Yours to-morrow: —all the to-morrows."

Something in the tone made Lenox scrutinise his face, but Quita pushed back her chair with a light remark, designed to catch his attention; and the incident slipped from his memory; to return in due time—when he held the key.

An hour later the Hut was abandoned to the babies; husband and wife having gone off in one direction; Laurence and Lyndsay in another. She wore the iris-blue muslin and wide hat that gave her so enchanting an aspect of youth; and the man carried her volume of Thompson's poems, at his own suggestion; partly for love of listening to her voice, and watching her unsuspected; partly because a definite subject for talk might serve to keep him clear of dangerous topics,—apt to obtrude themselves on last days. This one—following upon a night of storm—had a tender, quakerish beauty of its own. Deep-toned distances of purple and madder, black of drenched pines, vivid emerald of turf and moss; and, over all, a sky full of wistful silvery light, dappled with the myriad footprints of yesterday's wind.

Half an hour of steady ascent brought them to Lyndsay's enchanted corner, chosen for its commanding outlook over the fairest valley on earth, where the Jhelum meandered like a slow serpent, between miles of golden rice-fields, and the great Wular Lake gleamed through a gossamer haze that translated the encircling mountains into misty blue barriers of air. Across them trailed films of cloud, grey as the sky. Everywhere half tones, tender outlines; the softness of all things visible that is the key-

note of Kashmir. Even the outcrop of granite on the hillside where they halted, had been clothed upon with golden-green livery of lichens and moss. They had spoken little on the way up; and now,—but for a murmur of content from Lyndsay—they still stood silent, gazing out upon the wide scene with a conscious community of feeling, rare enough even between close friends.

"Such a fine slab of rock here.—Won't you sit?" Laurence said at last; and upon the simple question their eyes met in a look that softened to a smile; the man's, plainly uttering the passionate regret he dared not put into words. Lyndsay's regret being of a tenderer, simpler quality, was the more readily expressed.

"You're sorry the week's over?" she said, answering his look and obeying his gesture. "So am I. But it's good to have it—for always. Things that have happened never really die, any more than people who have lived. Its hard to lose them, when they mean much to us; still—they leave their mark. These few months in Kashmir, for instance, may have to last me two or three years; and I am sure the memory of them will be a help, all through."

So rarely did she speak directly of herself that for the moment regret was lost in the thrill of it; and he looked his admiration. "It needs pluck to see things that way."

"Does it? I should say it needs the 'sorrowful great gift of imagination'; though whether the greatness shall outweigh the sorrowfulness depends—on other qualities. Perhaps there's where the courage comes in."

"Yes. I meant something of that sort. You've an uncanny knack of translating my jumbled, inarticulate thoughts."

She smiled. "Intuition, I suppose."

"Not sympathy?"

"Perhaps—a little of both! A few people have found me uncanny in that way. Father did—always."

"Have you ever tried sending your thoughts—from a distance?"

"Not consciously; though it is possible, that by thinking intensely enough, one may send them unawares. It is all a great mystery; but I am sure we are on the threshold of further knowledge in that direction."

"I wonder. Practical folk like myself are apt to be 'hard believing.' But still—"

"You're a poet," she put in softly.

"Also a keen mathematician; which complicates matters."

Temptation to speak of his experience in the Indus valley was strong. Determination to avoid risks alone enabled him to refrain. But the impulse that followed mastered him. He could only modify it by lightness of tone.

"Won't you try a few conscious experiments—in my direction; merely for the interest of the thing?" She mused a moment, compressing her lower lip. "I don't know. I think—letters must suffice."

"Very well. Your will is law." He spoke so humbly that she turned on him with her most luminous smile by way of atonement.

"Don't think me ungracious. The mere fact that I can refuse, simply and straightly, without hypocritical evasion, proves our friendship a reality."

"Yes, thank God."

Dangerous ground here; but he sheered off it courageously, putting forward the book—his shield and buckler. "*You'll* read to-day, won't you?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. Which?"

"As many as you will!"

So, for the best part of an hour they sat on, alternately reading and talking of the "big little things"; talk that gave proof of deeper intimacy than mere personalities, however perilous; though the fact occurred to neither at the time. Lyndsay's choice of poems culminated in the Ode after Easter; her low voice thrilling in response to its inspired rapture of renewal.

"We can do no better than end with the best," she decreed quietly in the pause that followed the last lines; and Laurence nodded.

"I imagined I knew that poem," said he, "but your reading is an interpretation. It was the one I always went back to, last summer, in the Valley, when I felt near the end of my tether."

"Did you? I'm glad—it was a help. It contains my talisman too."

"Which?—where?" he asked, leaning nearer, one hand on the rock behind her, his shoulder within two inches of hers as her finger traced the lines:

> "Power is man's with that great word of 'wait'
> To still the sea of tears and shake the iron heart of Fate."

"Pluck again!" he commented, smiling and withdrawing reluctantly to his former position. "But the trouble is, there are some things not to be won even by a lifetime of waiting."

"In that case one can only—'trust the larger Hope,'" she answered closing the book.

"Hard doctrine—for some of us. Besides—what we lose here, we lose irrevocably, in these conditions."

Words so poignantly true that she had no answer for them, and involuntary tears pricked her eyes. The arrival of Colonel Lenox on the scene, and the transparent absorption of man and wife in each other, had brought home to her, with cruel clearness, all that she herself had lost—irrevocably, through lack of knowledge and utter loneliness of heart, setting aside her husband's skill in utilising both. Had Fate thrown her earlier with such men as Lenox, Finlay, Laurence—what then? Not all her faithfulness and resolute hope could banish outright the intrusive thought that seemed covertly to mock at both; and Laurence, intent on his own dilemma, had turned the knife in her hidden wound.

Seeing her troubled he said no more; but leaning forward, elbows on knees, demolished a gleaming cushion of moss with the end of his stick, and raged fruitlessly at his own inability to help. Minute by minute the silence between them grew and deepened, till it became merged in the greater silence of sky and forest and rain-washed hills. She, who had grown used to such quiet spells with him, was scarcely aware of it; while for him it was so fraught with peril that he half regretted his hardihood in coming out alone with her at all. Good resolves notwithstanding,—his thoughts ran riot. Hers were unrevealed. Seemingly she had slipped away from him into a world he could not share with her; and it was the temptation to force her back that tormented him most.

Her actual musings at that moment would have amazed

him. Deliberately thrusting aside her own trouble, the mother-spirit that dominated her was wondering about his ultimate future; wondering why that impulsive half-confidence had not led to further mention of the unknown.

Friendly interest in the man and the natural woman's love of romance made her long for details more explicit. Fuller knowledge, too, might enable her to judge whether matters were really as irrevocable as he supposed. The best men were often so stupid about such things; and the hopeless note in his voice had roused the instinct to help that was her second nature; and that, in her present state of ignorance, could only find such inadequate outlet as pointing him to a talisman that seemed in keeping with his need.

A movement from Laurence broke the spell; and she turned on him eyes in which a brooding tenderness still lingered.

"Forgive me for deserting you! And now—it's high time to be getting back to earth."

"Is it? So soon?"

"I'm afraid so." She consulted her watch. "Why it's after one! We shall have Paul hunting us up to make sure you haven't let me fall over the *khud!* We'd better take the short cut he's so fond of. Rather a rough scramble—for me; but I'm mountaineer enough now to manage it alone; and amateur enough to enjoy showing off! I must go first; and if you offer to help me down difficult bits, I shall be seriously annoyed!"

He laughed. "I've never seen you annoyed yet! But if things look bad I shall certainly take the risk!"

And on that compact they set forth, Lyndsay leading, down a stretch of rugged hillside, and grey tumbled rock bright with lichen and moss. Her sure lightness of movement charmed the man; but as descent grew rougher and steeper instinct mastered him. Twice he begged to go first, and was twice refused; but the third time there was that in his voice that checked her, and she stood aside to let him pass.

"Oh well, go on if you must! How obstinate you are! I don't remember such a bad bit. Perhaps I've lost my bearings."

"I've got 'em all right. Trust me." He glanced over the *khud* on his left, that sheered to a stony watercourse. "Lord,—what a nasty drop. Stay still please, till I reach that bit of level."

The note of command in his voice compelled obedience; but the little adventure exhilarated her; and when, before reaching the level, he turned, holding up his hand, she would have none of it.

"That wasn't part of the bargain!" she declared laughing. "Stand where you said, in case you're wanted; but don't spoil my small climb!"

He dared not argue, lest his voice betray him; and from the grassy space below he stood watching her progress, conscious of all his manhood terribly awake.

She began successfully enough, stopping once to smile down at his set, upward-looking face. Then—either she miscalculated the distance, or his anxiety infected her, as anxiety will; for almost within reach of him she stumbled, lurched to the left, with a little cry, and a moment later he had her against his heart; held her there, for one rapturous second, with arms that trembled yet were iron.

"Lyndsay—Lyndsay!" he whispered, reproach whelmed in the pent-up passion of months.

"Captain Laurence!"

Her recoil was instantaneous, and her release no less so. His madness passed from him with his anxiety; leaving him stunned to speechlessness by the pain, amazement, anger, concentrated into her utterance of his name; by the knowledge that in one second of time he had taken the unique friendship that was his, and shattered it with his own hands.

As for her, associating him for weeks with another woman, she could not grasp, all at once, the evidence of her senses; and as truth penetrated there seemed no room for the intrusion of self. In the clash of sensations, all coherent thought was centred on him; and at last he had a vision of her lifted face, flame in her cheeks, trouble in her eyes.

"Oh why—?" she began and could get no farther; every nerve in her shrank from the pain of giving pain.

This in a measure he divined; and drawing a step

nearer, stood before her, his lips and eyes stern with hardly controlled emotion.

"Lyndsay—will you ever forgive me? I thought you were gone; or—it would never have happened. You know that."

She saw he had spoken her name almost unconsciously, and let it pass. "Yes—I know. I blame myself most—"

"You shall *not*," he broke in vehemently. "And I'm bound to tell you why, now that there can be no more—pretence at friendship—"

"Pretence? Has it been pretence—always?"

"Yes. Always."

"O-oh." She steadied her lips with difficulty. It seemed as if those two words hurt her more than anything.

"You see what I mean?" he urged more gently. "Your—your kindness is in no way responsible. The mischief was done at sight—that evening, before I knew—"

"Oh," she breathed again, and he detected faint reproach in the low sound.

"You think I should have gone off at once—not seen you again?"

"I?—How can I tell?" A small familiar figure bounding up the hillside toward them caught her eye, and she smiled wanly. "Why, here's the child. I said he would come!"

Her first flush, subsiding, had left her very pale; and Laurence, bending a little towards her, spoke low and steadily. "I shall never forgive myself for having failed you—never. But my penalty's heavy enough—God knows."

He turned away, as if to leave her; and at that she looked up again, pain and pity contending in her eyes.

"Don't think too harshly of yourself. And—please come back with us. It might seem strange."

"Very well. Whatever you wish."

And before she could answer Paul was upon them, jubilantly unaware.

"You woz *so* long, an' I got tired of waiting," he apologised clutching Lyndsay's hand. "Did he keep care of you properly?—Did you?"

His clear eyes confidently challenged the man's; and Laurence, pulling himself together, laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"No, Paul, not half so well as you would have done. You're the better man of the two; and it's your turn now—for always. Are the others back?"

"Yes."

"Come on then. We must hurry home."

And with the child between them, chattering happily of the morning's adventures, they effectually accomplished their descent to earth.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

**Le pire douleur est de ne pouvoir pleurer ce qu'on a perdu.**

LUNCH over, and the travellers gone, Lyndsay stood alone in her little room, that for nearly a month had been a shrine of peace, trying to set her confused emotions in order; to take cognizance, calmly, of this veritable bolt from the blue that still amazed and pained her past expression.

Arriving late, they had sat down at once to a hasty meal; and thereafter, Laurence had taken leave of her in the verandah, under the eyes of Lenox and his wife. No formal word of parting had been spoken; and instead of the crushing clasp she had dreaded, he had held her hand gently, closely, as a man might hold the most sacred thing on earth, retaining it a second longer than need be: that was all. And she had seen tears in his eyes through the mist that clouded her own. Quita had ridden down with the men, to the foot of the hill; and Lyndsay, having ruefully barred her door against the boy she so loved, stood at her window, looking out upon the shadow-dappled pines, tears coursing unheeded down her cheeks.

Her primary sensation was of a great and permanent loss; a change from long looking up, to a poignant compassion; and, underlying all, the inevitable mortification of finding that this friend—whom she had unconsciously exalted to a plane where he could meet her need—was, after all, very much as other men, in one respect, at least. The pain and dismay of her sudden discovery seemed to cast a blight not merely over the present, but over all that had been between them; over the frank friendship that had meant so much to her,—how much, she had scarcely realised till now.

Yet was she not of those who confuse material issues with spiritual values; and the soul of justice that was so strong in her, enforced recognition of his controlled up-

rightness throughout; prevented her, also, from allowing a moment's failure—for which she held herself more than half responsible—to shake her fundamental faith in him. Few facts work more potently, more insidiously, on a true woman than the knowledge of a man's love for her; and Lyndsay, with her haunting sense of responsibility, could not but suffer acutely from the realisation that she had wakened in a man—and such an one—the need of all others which she had neither right nor power to fulfil. Nay more, she saw, now, with cruel clearness, how, at every turn, she had unwittingly made things harder for him, through the very honesty of her desire to help, and her incurable passion for making others happy. Yet, so ironical is the relation between desire and achievement, that she seemed only to have succeeded in making two men miserable. In Laurence's case, alas, no more could be said or done: and so an end of an unforgettable chapter of her life.

Resolutely blinking back her tears, she turned away from the window to remove the hat she still wore; the hat she had put on—that morning, was it . . . or a year ago? And there, propped against her tiny mirror, stood the letter posted by Karim Bux on Thursday morning. With unsteady fingers, and a strange revulsion of feeling, she broke the seal; lifted her brows at the abrupt opening—"Lyndsay"; and sat down on her bed to read at leisure the fevered out-pouring of an ill-balanced mind. If the morning's discovery had dealt her a blow from which her brain still reeled, Videlle's letter set a dagger-thrust in her heart, that slowly drained the blood from her face, the tenderness from her eyes; till, upon reaching the last unwarrantable sneer, she sat motionless, with set lips, consumed by a white flame of scorn and anger, such as she had deemed herself incapable of feeling toward any human being, least of all the man whom she called husband.

The state of mind that could produce such a letter was outside her range of comprehension. What did he mean her to understand, she wondered blankly, by these vituperative insinuations against herself and that other, who despaired of her forgiveness because he had lost his head at sight of her danger, and thereby, in all likelihood,

saved her life. Videlle's outburst could scarcely have come at a moment more fatal to himself, more dangerous for her. Comparison between the two was unavoidable; and in approaching it, however vaguely, she stood, for the first time, on the brink of discovering why the morning's catastrophe had seemed to bring half the world toppling about her ears. At that moment nothing short of her ingrained self-forgetfulness could have saved her. Now, as at the critical juncture when Laurence stood humbled before her, concentration on the man outweighed all other considerations. Her present anger and bewilderment were engendered less by Videlle's brutality in writing so to her, than by the fact that he was capable of so thinking and so writing at all. This was the man for whom she had been ready to forego, at the last moment, her dream of a summer in Kashmir; for whom she had been planning and thinking in the past weeks, with an enthusiasm of self-surrender. This man, who could conceive such unspeakable impossibilities, was the father of her child—!

The letter fluttered through her fingers to the floor; and she hid her face in her hands. "Dear God, it is too much!" she moaned under her breath, and, swaying sideways onto the bed, lay there in a state of blank misery, too numb for tears; misery that whelmed her in deep waters where all horizons were one. What would be the end of it? If he lived would she go back to him, forgiveness or no? The questions formed themselves mechanically in her brain; but, except for a dismal sense of familiarity, seemed to have no vital connection with herself.

She was roused at last by a gentle knocking and Paul's silvery voice through the door. "Lady Lyndsay, please open. Here's a telegramph come."

At sight of her face he caught and kissed the hand that took the envelope.

"Are you been sad? Did anyone bother you?"

Detecting repressed eagerness beneath his concern, she took his head between her hands and kissed his eyes, lingeringly, each in turn.

"It's not the kind of bother that fighting would help, darling."

Then she vanished again behind the detested door, with

the unopened wire; and Paul went sorrowing away. That upon the first evidence of real trouble to his lady he should be kissed and put gently on one side, went near to break his knightly heart. The sight of Quita riding up cheered him faintly, and he hastened to pour forth his story.

"Oh, Aunt Quita, Lady Lindsay did lock her door all ve time. An' it's a bother fighting can't help. An' now there's a telegramph come."

Information that sent Quita speedily to Lyndsay's door. She had not failed to detect the change in Laurence. Lenox, too, had been aware of it; and, in spells of silence during the ride, had been laboriously putting two and two together and trying not to see that they made four. The locked door, therefore, did not surprise his wife, who had returned vaguely prepared for tragedy of some sort; but the telegram—

"Mrs. Videlle," she called gently, "I'm back again. May I come in?"

"Yes. Come."

The toneless voice matched the face that confronted her:—white to the lips, the eyes dry and expressionless; the mask of a spirit stunned to apathy by "stroke again and stroke."

"My dear, what *is* it? Bad news?" Quita asked under her breath, and Lyndsay handed her the flimsy sheet.

Its brief, bald statement could be taken in at a glance. "Grieve to say your husband died of plague this morning. Writing. Routh."

"*Mon Dieu!*" she murmured and glanced again at the set face in which it was hard to recognise the Lyndsay Videlle she had come to know and love. "Something must be done to make her feel," she thought; and closing the door, slipped an arm round the small rigid figure that submitted to her touch without response.

"Dear, it is terrible—terrible! Had you any notion?"

The question set a faint line of pain in Lyndsay's forehead. It was as if she recalled herself, with an effort, from a great way off.

"I found a letter, just now—he was going—" her frown deepened and the frozen look melted out of her eyes. "I'm so sorry—just when you must be feeling lonely.

But I'm afraid, I'm no use—for anything this evening. I hardly yet—understand—"

There spoke the real Lyndsay, and Quita pressed her closer.

"*Mon Dieu*—don't think of me! I am only so thankful to have you—to do what I can; though it's little enough. Come now and lie down. Your poor hands are like ice."

Smiling faintly, lest she seem ungrateful, Lyndsay suffered herself to be drawn down onto the bed; while Quita cherished her cold fingers, murmuring words of sympathy and endearment in the vain hope of melting her dry-eyed anguish into a natural flow of tears. Then she bethought her of the child.

"You'd rather lie quiet, and just have Baby when she comes in?"

"Please."

"And what about dinner? You must eat a little, dear."

Lyndsay shook her head. "I don't want to. But I do want Baby." Her face softened. "And please tell Paul —about it. Let him come—to say good-night."

"He shall bring you in something." Quita persisted gently. "And you'll eat it—to please him?"

"Perhaps. How kind you are!"

"Oh, it's not kindness!" And baffled by despair of attempting to express her sympathy in words, she kissed the cool white cheek. "I'll come back soon, dear, and bring his child. It may be easier to speak of things to-morrow."

For answer Lyndsay pressed the hand that held her; and Quita, kissing her again, went reluctantly out, leaving her alone with the letter and telegram that, between them, had temporarily dazed her brain.

With little Monica's arrival came faint comfort, and the need for simple, wholesome action that is pain's best antidote. There was faint comfort also in Paul Desmond's clinging arms, the touch of his soft lips upon her cheek; and his shy whisper: "Darling Lady Lyndsay, you've still got me to keep care of you,—me an' Captain Laurence."

A dismal sense of desolation was upon her, a need to be loved such as she had rarely known; she for whom giving rather than taking was the law of life. But, as yet,

nothing availed to soften the stone, that seemed to have replaced her heart of flesh, since that curt message had crushed her, not only with the fact, but with the awful sense of having given place to anger and scorn against the dead: her dead, whom she had loved in spite of all.

Through the greater part of the night she lay without sleep; her brain and imagination painfully alert. The anguish of mind and body that he must have endured pervaded her whole being with an eerie and horrible actuality, intensified by the fact that his last thoughts of her had been harsh and unjust; his last words crueller than any he had ever spoken. For herself, living mainly through others, bereft in one day of husband and friend, she seemed no more than a stranded atom of life, afloat in a desert of space, even her child forgotten in the nightmare of emptiness that overwhelmed her.

Then slowly, vaguely—as the square of lesser dark that was her window paled toward sunrise—the realisation of freedom filtered in, like a sun-ray, through the encompassing dark; not yet a sun-ray of comfort, but of an almost unbearable revelation, that deep down, beneath the pain, the horror, and the pity, lurked a dawning glimmer of relief. And she, who had borne up bravely under prolonged trial, refusing to believe it too great, lay helpless and broken in the hour of that knowledge; too stunned, and tired, even to take it in.

But morning brought its own wholesome influences, brought also a cooing, pink-cheeked Monica into her bed; and no sooner had Miriam dressed and carried her off than Quita knocked at the door. She came armed with early tea; and, while Lyndsay ate and drank, lured her tenderly into speaking a little of herself,—though not of the man who was gone. This led them eventually to practical considerations; and Lyndsay murmured, with a sigh: "It's all so vague. I hardly know what to do—where to turn."

"Where do you want to turn—Home?" Quita asked, not without eagerness; and for a moment Lyndsay looked puzzled. She could do just what she wished. There was no one to consider. It was incredible; and, at the same time, more than a little dismal.

"I—I suppose so," she said, wearily, "on account of

Mrs. Rivers. But—I don't seem to want to do anything, or go anywhere—"

Then Quita set both hands on her shoulders as she lay amongst her pillows; "In that case you dear, dear little woman—why can't you stop on with us?"

Something in the tone or the touch of her hands melted the frozen fountains of grief, and sudden tears scalded Lyndsay's eyes. "I would love to," she murmured with a catch in her voice. "But then—I couldn't stay—endlessly."

"Of course you could. The more endlessly the better! You see how much alone I am, in spite of having Eldred and the chicks; and in the winter, above all, you'd be a godsend—you really would."

Lyndsay was crying quietly now; the slow, soft tears that bring healing in their wake; and Quita, stooping, kissed her lips.

"I consider that quite settled, Lady Lyndsay!" she said. "And now, please get up to breakfast, or the poor little knight, who worships the ground you tread on, will break his heart, and Honor would never forgive me!"

Monday brought detailed confirmation of Videlle's tragic ending in the shape of letters from Carrie and Dr. Routh. A glance at the former sufficed to show Lyndsay that it was but an exaggerated replica of her brother's, on different lines; and after wading through a page of incoherent lamentation and accusation, she quietly tore up the rest unread. One such infliction within a week was enough for any woman's nerves. Dr. Routh's letter she opened with deeper dread of its contents; but—as often happens—where she looked to find black darkness, she found instead the one ray of light in unrelieved gloom.

Dr. Routh wrote at some length of Videlle's work at Miranghat, of the sharpness of the attack, and the hard fight he had made for life; adding at the last: "He seemed much troubled throughout his illness on account of a letter he had sent you on Thursday; and begged me to tell you, from him, that he was tired and worried at the time of writing; that he retracted every word in it that might give you pain and asked your forgiveness. He sent thanks also for one received on Saturday, which he was

just able to read, and which seemed greatly to ease his mind. He died with it in his hand; and it will be buried with him to-night."

Not two sheets in all; but it took long to read, for the letters ran hither and thither upon the page, contorting themselves strangely, and more than a few were blurred by falling tears. The last lines sent Lyndsay to her knees beside the bed where she had lain in her wrath and anguish; and if the spirits of the dead have any cognizance of those they have loved on earth, then assuredly James Videlle knew that he was forgiven.

END OF BOOK III.

# BOOK IV.

## THE GATE OF DAWN.

If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast: its splendour, soon or late,
Shall pierce the gloom. I shall emerge one day.

—BROWNING.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

This moment is a statue unto Love,
Carved from a fair white silence.
Lo he stands
Within us—are we not one now, one, one roof,
His roof,—and the partition of weak flesh
Gone down before him, and no more, forever?
—F. Thompson.

"Four Sahibs' tents, and three servants' ones. Quite a respectable little colony! And I particularly admire the meat safe ornamenting that pine branch! You'll find this even more primitive than the Hut. When we dine out, our plate and cutlery go before, and our chairs follow after. But we're safe from rain, yet awhile; and I think we shall manage to be very happy here for the next two months—eh, Lyndsay mine?"

It was Quita Lenox who spoke, standing bare-headed under a noble group of pines, which rugs, tea-table and wicker chairs had converted into an *al fresco* sitting-room; and Lyndsay smiled up at her from the depths of a canvas lounge.

"I can answer for myself, dear," she said with transparent honesty, if without fervour; and Quita's finger-tips caressed her hair.

"Then no one else needs answering for. You're the Alpha and Omega of the whole plan; and if Pahlgam properly brings you back to life I shall love it better than any place on earth.—Now I must just wind up my *dák* and put finishing touches to the drawing-room tent; then we'll stroll down to the Post-Office tent and do what my Honor calls 'dumb scramble' for letters. Post-bag time is the one exciting moment of the day in this lotus-eating Elysium. When I was here two years ago, and the camping-ground was full, we used to descend in force upon the luckless Baboo, and drive him half crazy by trying to

snatch our letters, as they appeared, before he could stamp them with his sacred post-mark. I was one of the most daring—and successful! If it's the same man, he's sure to remember the Gilgiti Memsahib—Oh, thank God, the winter's over, and the snow on those detestable passes melting earlier than usual. *Au revoir*, porcelain Person!"

"Wouldn't fire-proof china be nearer the mark?" Lyndsay's smile ended in a small sigh; and with swift compunction Quita pressed her hand. "No, not half beautiful enough," she said tenderly. "Lie still and dream a little. I won't be long."

And she vanished into the tent, leaving Lyndsay alone, with the pines and the spring sunshine and the lengthening shadows of the hills.

Ten months, and more, had slipped away since that day of disaster. For the million millionth time, with no perceptible decrease of zest, earth was renewing her ancient rapture, her irresistible murmur of young hopes and young desires:—and Lyndsay, too, thanked God that the winter was over; though for her it had been a time of healing, and of steadily deepening peace,—a blessing little known to her since marriage had laid its disturbing hand upon her life. Not lightly does a woman of Lyndsay Videlle's temperament recover from such a three-fold shock as had crushed her to earth in that last week of June; but by gradual and kindly degrees, Time and the mountains, and, above all, increasing concentration on her child had accomplished their perfect work. As a flower—crushed, yet not broken, by a passing heel—slowly straightens its stem, and lifts bruised petals to the sun, so she—having gone softly through the autumn and winter—felt, with the year's awakening, the sap of new life rising in her veins; and with it the stirring of unformed hopes, that would some day step out of the shadow into fulness of light.

In September, Lenox had spent a farewell fortnight in Gulmerg, before the long separation of winter; and here he had found the Desmonds, up on six weeks' leave, come to carry their priceless son and daughter back to Kohat. Thither Quita and Lyndsay had followed them, to Paul's exceeding joy, when the first snow-fall sealed the passes,

and gaps between letters became distractingly long and irregular. In this desert station,—which had greatly developed since Honor's first sight of it—the two lone women shared a bungalow, though most of their days were spent with the Desmonds. Paul's devotion to Lyndsay had speedily brought her into close touch with his parents; and her enthusiasm for both roused her as nothing had done till then. Desmond and Colonel Wyndham, after polo, with all five children scrambling over them like puppies, and two jubilant dogs on the outskirts of the tangle, was a sight to chase clouds from the darkest sky; and the former's peculiar tenderness towards Paul's "bonnet baby" reminded Lyndsay, with a pang, of the banished friend, banished now even from her thoughts. For, since that day of shock, she had shut the door of her heart and locked it fast; refusing to look into it, or to acknowledge, even in secret, the rest and relief of freedom after the two years' strain of marriage.

Quita, watchful always for signs of future awakening, administered such scanty news as came her way during the semi-silence of the winter months; but only once, on a day in January, did she approach personal comment.

"I thought you and Captain Laurence wrote to one another," she remarked casually, while addressing her own Gilgit letter.

"No."

"But you seemed such good friends."

"We are. He quite understands."

By this time Quita knew her Lyndsay well enough to respect the hint of finality in the tone; and indeed, at that time, her own anxieties tended to dwarf all other considerations. Since autumn, the whole Gilgit district had been in a simmer of unrest; and by March the Indus Valley tribes were in revolt, Nagar again unsettled, and Chitral steadily working up toward disturbances that were to end in a campaign; Russia, as usual, complicating matters by a scherzo movement on the Pamirs. More than ever Lenox felt like a man handling a coach and four on a six foot path; more than ever he was hampered, in his critical and delicate task, by paucity of troops, and the difficulty of feeding those he had; facts which Quita's nimble intuitions detected beneath his quasi-satirical

comments on the situation, and which hastened their migration northward; since letters reached Srinagar fifty-six hours earlier than Kohat.

So, in the last days of March, they had parted from the Desmonds; and, after a month spent in house-*doongas*, had pushed on to Palhgam, a favourite camping-ground, two days' march up the Liddar Valley, through scenery that grew wilder and more beautiful at every step. Quita, fearing lest Gulmerg awaken painful memories, had suggested a spell of tent-life before the rains; and Lyndsay's evident zest for the plan had rejoiced her heart. Hence the encampment under the pines, pitched upon a grassy level, enamelled with purple and blue, and shelving gently to the stretch of meadowland that skirts the Liddar at this stage of its career. Three or four other encampments occupied similar ledges; and, by way of meeting their needs, a few native merchants from Srinagar had set up tent-shops, whose supplies ranged from kerosine oil and shirt buttons to Indian embroideries and eau de Cologne. The ragged tent-post-office occupied a central position under a giant pine; its trunk disfigured by a wooden letter-box, cleared once a day, when the incoming mail-bag exchanged letters from the bustling outer world for letters from the heart of peace.

And while Lyndsay lay dreaming in the midst of it all, the door of her own heart was opening slowly, surely, to admit the clamorous spirit of spring, and let out into the light a shy hope that the return of summer might bring back—someone, who could not believe himself for ever banished out of her life. She found the bare possibility so disturbing after months of tranquillity, that it was almost a relief when Quita reappeared, flourishing a thick envelope addressed to "Colonel Lenox, C. B., C. I. E., D. S. O."

"When I really want to annoy him I give him all eight of them, extra large!" she explained laughing. "But there's a sheet for each one, inside, to atone."

"Amazing woman! How do you fill them all?"

"*Je ne sais.* He assures me I was born talking! Even when nothing happens, there always seems plenty to tell. And, by the way Lyndsay, some of it, this time, concerns you."

"Me? But how?"

Quita detected the new note in her voice, half timid, half eager; and went smilingly on. "Well, you see, I'm always looking for the chance to get another few months over there; and things look so much quieter now, he thinks it might be possible—"

"While I take charge of the babies? I should love it."

"No doubt. But that's not the scheme. I should want you to come too."

"Oh, my dear!" Would she or no, the scarlet flag flew to her cheeks; but her voice was cool and steady as she added: "It's quite charming of you. But—I think not. Firstly, there's Baby; and secondly, you'd have no use for me—there."

"I should—heaps. Besides, there are other men as well as Eldred."

"And *I* should have no use for them!"

Quita's cool fingers caressed the flaming cheek.

"Perverse one! You can't shut them all out, for good, at five-and-twenty. But I won't bother you till the plan is more *pukka*. Come along and help me bother the Baboo instead!"

The mail-bag had just been emptied when they reached the shabby little tent, which flaunted the stern mandate, "No Admittance," though two men and a table occupied every inch of space. At their approach, the Bengali's spectacled eyes dilated, and two fat hands came down upon his unstamped treasures.

"Good evening, Mr. Ghóse; I see you haven't forgotten the Gilgiti Memsahib," she rallied him affably.

"No, ladee, I am not forgetting. Too much illegitimate business on my conscience which is delicate as two-year-old child's. I will seek hastily for letters; onlee wait till official stamp is duly affixed."

"Official candle-ends! What on earth does it matter? And before he guessed her intent, she had deftly tweaked a familiar-looking envelope from under his hand.

"Gilgit note-paper, I'll swear!" She glanced at the address. "Why Lyndsay—how unfair! It's for you."

"Me?" Lyndsay echoed faintly; and—while Quita

secured her own, after legitimate delays—stood gazing at her new possession in wonder, hope and fear; then, without further comment, slipped it into her pocket.

As they strolled homeward, Quita read out snatches of her news to cover her friend's silence; and, at last—"Ah, *nous voici!*" she cried eagerly. "Listen, *ma chère.* 'As to your chances of getting over, things certainly look a shade more hopeful. I'd come across myself, if I could, at once; but I'm sending Laurence'—*that* accounts for your letter—'He starts with this. Double-marching, I fancy, wherever possible!'—*Bien.* Since it can't be Eldred, I'm delighted. Anything from Gilgit gives one a lift. And look here Lyndsay, if he's writing to you about it, remember, *I* want to see him, if you don't! Send him a message from me that I hope he will come up here for a night at least, if not more."

"Very well," Lyndsay answered with a small smile; and, on reaching camp, vanished into her own tent, where she tried in vain to steady her breath before breaking the seal.

How familiar the strong square writing looked; and how reminiscent of the hand that formed it! A few lines only, without beginning, as of old.

"I am venturing to write, because the Colonel is sending me to Srinagar on business; and kindly suggests a week's leave first, which I am taking, in the hope that you will not mind my coming up to the Camp for a night or two. But if you would rather I did not come, please say so, frankly. I shall understand. I hope to be in Srinagar a few days after this reaches you. An answer to the Chenar Bagh, by return, will catch me there; and I'll come straight on—*if I may.* A. L."

A simple statement of facts; yet she read and re-read it with a deepening glow at her heart. Its restraint and modesty, its very baldness, thrilled her as neither fervour nor appeal could have done; and covering her eyes with one hand, she stood, for a long moment, drowned fathoms deep in wonder that the world should hold such joy, and that she should never have known it till this hour. A delicate tremor ran through her, at thought of all that her "yes" would mean—for them both. Then things practical asserted themselves; and securing pen and

paper, she sat down to write a note that should convey nothing to the recipient beyond the permission he craved.

"Dear Captain Laurence,

"Please come. We shall both be so glad to see you. Before I read your letter, Mrs. Lenox told me to say she hoped you would stay a few nights. So do I.

"Yours very sincerely,

Lyndsay Videlle."

She read it over, ponderingly, once—twice, with tears in her eyes; the happiest tears she had ever known.

Then she sought out Quita, who lay in the canvas chair, drifting contentedly through her own letter. She glanced up smiling at Lyndsay's transfigured face.

"Well? Settled it all?"

"I have said, 'come.' He wants his answer to Srinagar, by return. Can the *sais* run back with it?"

"Of course." She secured the hand that hung within her reach. "He'll be here within the week, Lady Lyndsay; and—you are glad,—"

But the hand was quietly withdrawn. "I have said—we shall both be very glad. Now—let me go and find Muttoo."

For Lyndsay, the intervening days were as the shadow of a dream; a dream almost past believing. The long silence between them was ended at last. The whole awakening earth seemed filled with one presence, and one voice. Yet she ate, worked and talked with admirable unconcern, and kept her too vivid imagination rigidly in hand.

The third day brought a telegram: "Hope to arrive Wednesday"; and on Wednesday, after an early breakfast—while Quita interviewed the meat-safe, in the presence of all Pahlgam—Lyndsay strolled away by herself, without hat or parasol, since walking appeared the only motion likely to quiet the clamour within. He could scarcely arrive before lunch time, at earliest; but, by a natural impulse, her feet took the direction of her thoughts; and for near an hour she followed the downward course of the Liddar, that laughed and leaped among shining

boulders, between steep, imprisoning heights. On every hand the same glad quickening of life and hope. Even the changeless hills seemed mysteriously aware; and the sombre pines carried grey-green shoots, like Christmas candles. Far overhead, larks in their hundreds filled all heaven with ecstatic song, answered near at hand by the liquid note of the golden oriole and the languid *koorakoo koo, koorakoo* of doves among the pines. A crystalline morning, full of delicate, atmospheric lights and shadows; the sky, itself, so frail an azure that the uttermost blue-white peaks seemed to fade and dissolve into it, as thoughts dissolve into dreams on the edge of sleep; a morning when merely to breathe was to draw in the fulness of life; when the manifold beauty of earth made itself felt like fairy music, that cannot find its way out into chords and keys.

And through it all moved one small slim woman, in a grey gown, translated and enskied into regions vaguely guessed at,—realised never; splendidly conscious of discovery; of unimagined depths and distances seen as from a hill-top.

Then, into the midst of her exalted transports, her impersonal world of mountain, rock and river—behold, the intrusion of reality! Was it possible—already—?

With a quick, indrawn breath, and pulses all aflutter, she watched an approaching horseman, who had just flashed into view round the farthest visible corner of the road. Too far off for recognition; yet, even so, the pace was unmistakable; the pony, a grey; and the white speck skimming along in his wake extinguished the last flicker of doubt. For many moments she stood smitten to stillness by a joy that bordered on pain. Then a dip in the road took him from her; and, simply to recapture the sight of him, she went forward again, her heart in full and open riot.

He was coming—back into her life! Coming to claim and keep her, for all the years to be! That was the supreme, triumphant thought; though a thousand lesser ones danced in it like motes in a sunbeam.

The next turn showed him nearer; disturbingly nearer; face and figure plainly to be seen; the head well up; the round *shikari* helmet tilted backward, so that the May sunlight shone full upon his eyes and hair; and a south

wind, wandering up the valley, brought her snatches of the tune he whistled as he rode.

This time he spied her—doubted: slackened speed to make sure; then, gripping the Kabuli's flanks, vanished into the last dip; only to appear again a hundred yards above her; so near, that now it was she who paused, striving for mastery over the life that exulted in her veins.

He, perceiving her hesitancy, dismounted, and slipping the bridle over his arm came smilingly towards her.

As they had parted without formal leave-taking, so now, without spoken greeting, their hands met in a close, mutual clasp; and fell apart again, reluctantly, leaving them stranded upon a silence, leagues removed from that which had fallen between them like a sword, eleven months ago.

For seconds that were as long-drawn minutes, they stood so:—man and woman, eternal opposites, that create the eternal harmony of the spheres; she, throbbingly aware of that which radiated from the whole man, like an emanation; and he, beset by an overwhelming modesty, an acute consciousness of the purity, sweetness and splendour of this woman's soul, that, through immeasureable months of waiting, had so powerfully informed and dominated his own. And, while both shrank from the ineffectual remark that must shatter the stillness of their perfect hour, larks above and the Liddar below choired, unceasingly, the music hidden in the heart of each.

Lyndsay had decreed that the first word should be his; and he, still fearing to find friendship where he craved love, knew not, for his life, how to begin. She had given him her eyes for no more than a second, lest they betray her secret too soon; and, in despair of regaining them, he dropped headlong from the empyrean on to the common ground of speech.

"You knew I should get in early?"

She smiled, without looking up.

"Not quite so early as this! You must have started long before dawn."

"Well—naturally. It was a glorious ride. Lollo seemed almost—to understand. He went like a bird.—

And you—" his gaze lingered upon the exquisite curves and tinting of her face. "You are well—happy—?"

"Yes. Quita has been endlessly good to me."

"One could trust her for that. And—my small friend. —the 'bonnet Baby'—?"

It cost him an effort; and he did not miss her deepening flush upon the words. No impassioned caress or declaration of devotion could so deeply have moved her as this implied assurance of his triumph over the natural instinct of the natural man; and he had his reward in the glad upturning of her face, the tender inflection of her tone, in answering: "She is the happiest little person imaginable. To me, she grows more enchanting every month; and be sure, I do not forget that, but for you, I might have lost her long ago."

"Ah, how like you to think of that!" he said, an odd vibration in his voice. Then—determined to grasp his golden moment with both hands—he went on: "Since I wasn't expected so soon, is there any need—to hurry back? Lollo would be glad of a rest. And I—I should be glad to spend more than a bare five minutes at this unforgetable turn of the road. Shall we—?"

"Yes."

It was all she could say; and the strain of repression made her thankful to sink down upon a kindly projection of the bank; while he, choosing a grassy space, twisted Lollo's bridle round the stump of a pine.

The consummation of her dearest wish was upon her. In this man, whose love was so admirably compact of ardour and restraint, who had proved himself of the fibre that grows strong through pain and struggle, she recognised, with a rapture of conviction, her soul's predestined mate. Yet, when he returned and stood before her, no longer humbled, but modestly sure of himself, and proud of his long love, she must needs obey her woman's instinct and try to keep the inevitable at bay.

"You are going to stay, of course?" she said, in a tone intended to be conversational. "I suppose your things are coming on behind?"

"Yes. I've brought them—on the chance—"

"The chance?" Her surprise was genuine. "Why, we asked you?"

"I have not forgotten. But surely—*you* must know on whom it depends whether I stay, or go back to-night?" He drew a step nearer; and his low voice took on a depth and ringing quality that thrilled through her like organ music. "There is no need to tell you, and yet—I must tell you, how entirely and eternally all that I have and am are yours,—to do with as you will. And you,—who have always so understood me, will hardly need telling, either, what I have suffered, at thought of having failed you; what I suffer now in not being able to bring you the untarnished record of service that I swore should be yours. Can you—will you—wipe it all out, and trust me—as you did before—?"

His eyes dwelt upon her in a passionate appeal, that, without seeing, she felt in every fibre; and her answer came low and tenderly: "Do you really need—to ask that?"

"Perhaps not; since it is you I am asking. But now I want more than trust, more than friendship. I cannot be near you—now, without making love to you. If it is—too soon, or—quite hopeless, I go back to-night. I can only stay on condition that I have leave, at least,—to try and win you."

"Stay," she answered under her breath; and he drew nearer still.

"Does that mean—I may hope?"

She paused; seeming to ponder the question.

"Yes. I think—you may hope."

"Lyndsay!"

All his long-repressed passion and devotion spoke in that one cry of his heart, and all her tottering barriers went down before it. She looked up now; and the unveiling of her eyes showed him the gates of her soul flung wide. The sorrow and striving and slowly awakening wonder of the past months, fused into the fire of her great, conscious love, lay shining in their depths.

Yet her lips had only one word for him:—"Alan!"

"My God!" he breathed; and stood speechless.

Then the glory of dawn in her irradiated face drew him,—drew him, till he sank upon one knee, and his arms enfolded her.

"Beloved!" he whispered, watching the blood rise in her cheeks like wine in a transparent vessel.

For answer she leaned a little towards him, her lips just framing the heart's supreme word; and, in the rapture of revelation that followed, they were alone in space; he the only man and she the only woman in a temporarily enchanted world.

THE END.

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